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A COMMENTARY



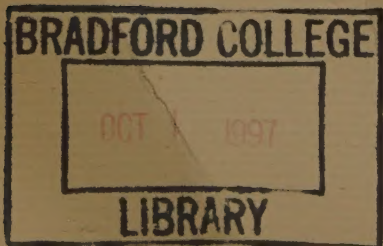
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GRANT RICHARDS

7 CARLTON STREET, LONDON, S.W.





# A COMMENTARY

BY

JOHN GALSWORTHY

AUTHOR OF

'THE ISLAND PHARISEES,' 'THE MAN OF PROPERTY,'  
'THE COUNTRY HOUSE,' ETC.

LONDON

GRANT RICHARDS

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# CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
<i>A COMMENTARY . . . . .</i>	13
<i>I. THE LOST DOG . . . . .</i>	29
<i>II. DEMOS . . . . .</i>	39
<i>III. OLD AGE . . . . .</i>	53
<i>IV. THE CAREFUL MAN . . . . .</i>	65
<i>V. FEAR . . . . .</i>	77
<i>VI. FASHION . . . . .</i>	89
<i>VII. SPORT . . . . .</i>	99
<i>VIII. MONEY . . . . .</i>	109
<i>IX. PROGRESS . . . . .</i>	129
<i>X. HOLIDAY . . . . .</i>	141
<i>XI. FACTS . . . . .</i>	151
<i>XII. POWER . . . . .</i>	167
<i>XIII. THE HOUSE OF SILENCE . . . . .</i>	179
<i>XIV. ORDER . . . . .</i>	191
<i>XV. THE MOTHER . . . . .</i>	203
<i>XVI. COMFORT . . . . .</i>	215
<i>XVII. A CHILD . . . . .</i>	231
<i>XVIII. JUSTICE . . . . .</i>	241
<i>XIX. HOPE . . . . .</i>	255





## A COMMENTARY



## A COMMENTARY

THE old man whose call in life was to warn the public against the dangers of the steam-roller, held a small red flag in his remaining hand, for he had lost one arm. His brown face, through whose leathery skin white bristles showed, had a certain dignity; so had his square upstanding figure. And his light grey eyes, with tiny pupils, gazed with a queer intentness, as if he saw beyond you. His clothes were old, respectable, and stained with grease; his smile shrewd and rather sweet, and his voice—of one who loved to talk, but whose profession kept him silent—was deliberate and sonorous, with a whistling lisp in it, because he had not many teeth.

‘What’s your opinion?’ he said one summer morning. ‘I’ll tell you *my* experience: a lot o’ them that’s workin’

## A COMMENTARY

on road jobs like this are fellers that the Vestries takes on, makin' o' work for them—the lowest o' the low. You can't do nothing with them; here to-day and gone to-morrow. Lost dogs I call 'em. Most of them goes on the drink the moment they gets a chance, and the language that they'll use—oh dear! But you can't blame them's far as I can see—they're born tired. They ain't up to what's wanted of 'em nowadays. You might just as well put their 'eads under this steam-roller and 'ave done with it.'

Then lowering his voice as though imparting information of a certain value. 'And that's just what I think's 'appened to them already; that great thing'—he pointed to the roller—'that great thing goes on, and on, and on—it's gone over them! Life nowadays has got no more feelin' for a man than for a beetle. See the way the poor live—like pigs, crowded all together; to any one who knows, it's awful! An' morals—something dreadful! How can you have morals when you've got to live like that—let alone humanity? You can't, it stands to reason. Talk

## A COMMENTARY

about democracy—government by the people? There's no sense in it; the people's kept like pigs; all they've got's like pig-wash thrown 'em. They know there's no hope for them. Why, when all's done, a working-man can't save enough to keep 'imself in his old age. Look at me! I've lost my arm, all my savin's was spent when I was gettin' well; I've got this job now, an' very glad to get it—but the time'll come when I'll be too old to stand about all weathers; what'll happen? I'll either 'ave to starve or go into the 'Ouse—well, that's a miserable ending for a man. But then you say, what can you do? That's just it—what *can* you do? Where's the money to come from? People say Parliament ought to find it, but I've not much 'opes of them; they're very slow. All my life I've noticed that. Very slow! Them fellers in Parliament, they've got their positions and one thing and another to consider, the same as any other people; they're bound to be cautious, they don't want to take no risks, it stands to reason. Well, that's all against reforms, I think. All they do,

## A COMMENTARY

why it's no more than following after this 'ere roller, treadin' in the stones.'

He paused, looking dubiously at the roller, now close at hand. 'See what a lot o' things the money's wanted for. It's not only old-age pensions, there's illness! When I lost my arm, and lay there in the 'orspital, it worried me to think what I should do when I got out—put me in such a stew; well, there's thousands like that—people with consumption, people with bad blood—'undreds an' thousands, that's got nothin' to fall back on; they're in fear all their time.'

He came closer, and his voice seemed to whistle more than ever. 'It's a dreadful thing, is fear. I thought that I'd come out a log, an' just 'ave to rot away. I've got no family—but them fellers in consumption with families an' all, it's an awful thing for them. Here's a carriage—I mustn't get to talking!'

He moved forward to the barrier, and stood there holding up his flag. A barouche and pair came sweeping up; the sun shone on its panels, on the horses' coats, the buttons of the coach-



## A COMMENTARY

man, and the egrets in two ladies' hats. It swerved at sight of the red flag, and swung round the corner to the left.

'The old man stood looking after it, and the silence was broken only by the crunching of the roller. Rousing himself from reverie, he said: 'Fashion! D'you know, I can't tell what them sort of people think of all day long. It puzzles me. Sometimes I fancy they don't think at all. Thinking's all done for them!' And again he seemed to lapse into his reverie. 'If you told them that, they'd stare at you. Why, they fancy they're doin' an awful lot, what with their bazaars an' one thing an' another. Them sort of people, they don't mean any 'arm, but they 'aven't got the mind. You can't expect it of them, livin' their lives; you want a lot o' mind to think of other people.'

Suddenly his eyes brightened. 'Why, take them street-walkers you see about at night; now what d'you think ladies in their carriages thinks of them—dirt! But them women 'alf the time's no worse than what the ladies are. They took their bit o' sport, as you may call it—same as lots

## A COMMENTARY

o' ladies take it. That's where money comes in—they 'adn't the money to keep off the streets. But what are you to do? You can't have the creatures about.' A frown came on his brow, as though this question had long been troubling him. 'The rich,' he went on, 'are able for to educate their daughters, and look after them; I don't blame them—it's human nature to do the best you can for your own family; but you've got to think of others that haven't got your money—you've got to be human about it. The mischief is, when a man's got money, it's like a wall between 'im an' 'is fellows. That's what I've found. What's your opinion? Look here! My father was a farm labourer, at eight shillin's a week, an' brought up six of us. And 'owever 'e managed it I don't know; but I don't think things are any better than they were then—I don't—I think they're worse. This progress, or what do they call it, is destroyin' of us. You can't keep it back, no more than you could keep back that there roller if you pushed against it; all you can do's to keep ahead of it, I suppose. But

## A COMMENTARY

talk about people's increasin' in the milk of human kindness—I don't see it, nor intelligence. Look at the way they spend their 'olidays—it gives you stomach-ache to see them. All a lot o' rowdy fellers, never still a minute, that's lost all religion—a lot o' town-bred monkeys. This 'ere modern life, it's hollowed of 'em out, that's what it's done, in my opinion. People's got so restless; they keep on tryin' first one thing and then another; anything so long as they can be doing something on their own. That's a fact. It's like a man workin' on a job like this road-mendin'; he just sees the stones he's puttin' down himself, and he don't see nothing else. That's what everybody's doin'. But I don't see how you can prevent it; it looks as if 'twas in the blood. They talk about this Socialism; well, but I'm not very sweet on it—it's mostly all a-lookin' after your neighbour, 's'far's I can see.'

He paused, staring hard, as though trying to see further. 'Well,' he went on suddenly, 'that won't work! Look at the police—never met such meddlesome creatures; very nice men in themselves, I

## A COMMENTARY

dare say, but just because they've got a little power—! And they're as thick as thieves together. Take these fellers that they send to prison; they talk about reformin' of them, but when they get them there it's all like that roller, crushin' the life out—awful, I call it. Them fellers come out dead, with their minds squashed out o' them; an' all done with the best intentions, so they tell me. I tell you what I think, there's only one man in a 'undred fit to 'ave power over other men put in his 'ands. Look at the workhouses—why ain't they popular? It's all because you've got to live by rule. I don't find no fault with rules so long as you don't order people about; what you want to do's to get people to keep rules of their own accord—that's what I think. But people don't look at it that way, 's'far's I can see. What's your opinion? Mind ye,' he went on suddenly, 'I'm not saying as there isn't lots o' things Government might do, that you'd call Socialism, I dare say. See the women in them slums—poor things, they can't hardly drag themselves along, and yet they breed like rabbits. I don't blame

## A COMMENTARY

them, they don't know no better. But look 'ere!' and thrusting the handle of the flag into his pocket, he took a button of his listener's coat between his finger and his thumb; 'I'd pass a law, I would, to stop 'em. That's going too far, you say! Well, but what's to be done? There's no other way, in my opinion. Then, of course, if you stop 'em, you won't 'ave none o' this cheap low-class labour. That won't please people. It's a difficult matter!'

He sank his voice to a sort of whistling whisper. 'Alf the children in them slums is brought about under the influence of drink. What d'you make of that? And that's only the beginning—they feed them poor little things on all sorts o' mucky stuff—an' lots o' them 'alf fed at that. Pretty state o' things for a country like this—it'd disgrace the savages, I think. I'd 'ave every child full-fed by law. I'd make it a crime, I would, to 'ave half-starved children about the streets or schools, or anywhere. I'd begin at the beginning. But then you say that's pauperising of the parents. That's what they said when they began this 'ere

## A COMMENTARY

free education—nobody ain't be pauperised by that. A country that n't keep its children fed ain't fit to 'ave em, that's what I think; 'tisn't fair ' them little things. But then you s' that'd cost a mint o' money—million. Of course it would! Well, look at the 'ouses in this road, look at them b' flats—'undreds an' thousands of street an' 'ouses like that all over England. They say that sixpence on the rates w'd feed the children, but they won't pt it on—of course they won't, it's s' much off their comfort. People do n't like parting; that's a fact, as you know yourself. But what's the good of aisin' millions of these 'ere dry-rotted fople—they're so expensive, you can't do nothing with them——' He broke off to intercept a cart. 'But I dare say' he said, returning, 'they'd call that Socialism. What's your opinion? Shall I tell you what I think about it? These Socialists are like men that keep a shop, an' some one walks in an' says: 'How much for the coat there?' he says. 'Ten bob!' they say. 'I'll give you five,' he says. 'No, we wants ten,' they say. 'No,



## A COMMENTARY

'e says, 'five!' And both of them knows all the time they're goin' to do a deal at seven an' six!'

He sank his voice, as though imparting a State secret: 'It wouldn't never do for them to say seven an' six straight off; then 'e'd only give 'em six an' three. See? If you want to get a proper price you've got to keep hollerin' for more—that's human nature.'

Then, waving his flag towards the block of flats, he said: 'Look at all this class of comfortable people. They don't see things the same as I do, an' I don't know why they should. They're comfortable themselves. It stands to reason they're not goin' to think about such things. They've been brought up to believe the world was made for them. They never see no other people but their own sort; same as workin' people never see no other but workin' people. That's what makes the classes, in my opinion. All these fellers here,' and he waved his hand towards the figures working at the road, 'talk very big about betterin' their position, but as soon as it comes to standin' by each

## A COMMENTARY

other it's every man for himself. It's only what you can expect—if you don't look out for yourself, nobody else will, that's as sure as eggs. They say, in England all men's equal under the law; well, but then you've only got to look around—that isn't true, how can it be? You've got to pay for law same as you've got to pay for everything. That's where it is! They talk about Justice in the country, the same for rich and poor; that's all very fine, but there's a 'undred ways where a man that's poor has to suffer for it, because he can't pull the lawyers' tails and make 'em jump.'

And with these words he tried to raise both arms, but he had only one. 'You haven't told me what you think?' he said: 'I'll tell you my opinion,' and his voice dropped to an emphatic whisper: '*There's things that want improvin', and there's things that stand in the way of things improvin'.* But I've noticed one thing; it don't matter how low people get, they're always proud of something, even if it's only of their troubles. There must be some good in human nature, or we'd

## A COMMENTARY

never keep ahead of that great thing at all;' he stretched his arm out to the roller, approaching with its slow crunching sound like the sound of Life crunching the bones of men; 'we'd let it go right over us.' And nodding his grey head twice, he stood holding up his red flag as still as stone, with his eyes fixed intently on a coming milk-cart.



THE LOST DOG





# I

## THE LOST DOG

**I**T was the first October frost. Outside a half-built house, before a board on which was written, 'Jolly Bros., Builders,' I saw a man, whose eyes seemed saying: 'In the winter building will stop; if I am homeless and workless now, what shall I be in two months' time?' Turning to me he said: 'Can you give me a job, Sir? I don't mind what I do.'

His face was in mourning for a shave, his clothes were very ragged, and he was so thin that there seemed hardly any man behind those ragged clothes. He smelt, not indeed of whisky, but as though bereaved of it; and his blue and watery eyes were like those of a lost dog.

We looked at each other, and this conversation passed between our eyes:

'What are you? Where did you work last? How did you get into this con-

## A COMMENTARY

dition? Are you married? How many children? Why don't you apply to the proper authorities? I have money, and you have none; it is my right to ask these questions.'

'I am a lost dog.'

'But I have no work for you; if you are really hungry I can give you sixpence; I can also refer you to a Society who will examine your affairs, but if they find you a man for whom life has been too much, they will tell me so, and warn me not to help you. Is that what you want?'

'I am a lost dog.'

'I dare say; but what can I do? I can't make work! I know nothing about you, I daren't recommend you to my friends. No man gets into the condition you are in without the aid of his own folly. You say you fell ill; yes, but you all say that. Why couldn't you look ahead and save some money? You see now that you ought to have? And yet you come to me! I have a great many calls—societies, old people, and the sick; the rates are very high—you know that—partly on your account!'

## THE LOST DOG

‘ I am a lost dog.’

‘ Ah ! but I am told daily by the just, the orderly, the practical, who have never been lost or hungry, that I must not give to casuals. You know yourself it would be pure sentiment ; you know yourself it would be mere luxury. I wonder you can ask me !’

‘ I am a lost dog.’

‘ You have said that before. It’s not as if I didn’t know you ! I have seen and talked with you—with dozens of you. I have found you asleep on the Thames Embankment. I have given you sixpence when you were shambling empty away after running a mile behind a cab. One night, don’t you remember, in the Cromwell Road—well, not you, but your twin brother—we talked together in the rain, and the wind blew your story against the shuttered windows of the tall, closed houses. Once you were with me quite six weeks, cutting up a dead tree in my garden. Day after day you sat there, working very slowly to keep the tree from coming to an end, and showing me in gratitude each morning your waistbelt

## A COMMENTARY

filling out. With the saw in your hand and your weak smile you would look at me, and your eyes would say : ‘ You don’t know what a rest it is for me to come here and cut up wood all day.’ At all events, you *must* remember how you kept yourself from whisky until I went away, and how you excused yourself when I returned and found you speaking thickly in the morning : ‘ I can’t *help* rememberin’ things !’ It was not you, you say ? No ; it was your double.’

‘ I am a lost dog.’

‘ Yes, yes, yes ! You are one of those men that our customs breed. You had no business to be born—or at any rate you should have seen to it that you were born in the upper classes. What right had you to imagine you could ever tackle the working-man’s existence—up to the mark all day and every day ? You, a man with a soft spot ? You knew, or your parents ought to have known, that you couldn’t stand more than a certain pressure from life. You are diseased, if not physically, then in your disposition. Am I to excuse you because of that ? Most probably I

## THE LOST DOG

should be the same if life pressed hard enough. Am I to excuse myself because of that? Never — until it happens! Being what you are you chose deliberately — or was it chosen for you — to run the risks of being born; and now you complain of the consequences, and come to me for help? To me—who may myself at some time be in need, if not of physical, of moral bread? Is it right, or reasonable?’

‘I am a lost dog.’

‘You are getting on my nerves! Your chin is weak—I can see that through your beard; your eyes are wistful, not like the professional beggar’s pebbly eyes; you have a shuffling walk, due perhaps a little to the nature of your boots; yes, there are all the marks of amiability about you. Can you look me in the face and say it would be the slightest use to put you on your legs and thrust you again, equipped, into the ranks of battle? Can you now? Ah! if you could only get some food in you, and some clothes on you, and some work to do! But don’t you know that, three weeks hence, that work would

## A COMMENTARY

be lost, those clothes in pawn, and you be on the drink? Why should I waste my charity on *you*—"the deserving" are so many! There's "something against you" too? Oh! nothing much—you're not the sort that makes a criminal; if you were you would not be in such a state. You would be glad enough to do your fellows a good turn if ever you could do a good turn to yourself; and you are not ungrateful, you would attach yourself to any one who showed you kindness. But you are hopeless, hopeless, hopeless—aren't you now?'

'I am a lost dog.'

'You know our methods with lost dogs? Have you never heard of the lethal chamber? A real tramp, living from hand to mouth in sun and rain and dirt and rags, enjoys his life. But *you* don't enjoy the state you're in. You're afraid of the days when you've nothing to eat, afraid of the nights when you've nowhere to sleep, afraid of crime, afraid even of this begging; twice since we've been standing here I've seen you looking round. If you knew you'd be afraid like

## THE LOST DOG

this, what made you first desert "the narrow path"? Something came over you? How could you let it come like that? It still comes over you? You were tired, you wanted something new—something a little new. We all want that something, friend, and get it if we can; but we can't recognise that *your* sort of human creature is entitled, for you see what's come of it?'

'I am a lost dog.'

'You say that as if you thought there were one law for the rich and another for the poor. You are making a mistake. If I am had up for begging as well as you, we shall both of us go to prison. The fact that I have no need to steal or beg, can pay for getting drunk and taking holidays, is hardly to the point—you must see that! Do not be led away by sentimental talk; if we appear before a judge, we both must suffer punishment. I am not so likely to appear as you perhaps, but that's an accident. No, please don't say that dreadful thing again! I wish to help you. There is Canada, but they don't want you. I would send you anywhere to stop your

## A COMMENTARY

eyes from haunting me, but they don't want you. Where do they want you? Tell me, and you shall go.'

'I am a lost dog.'

'You remind me of that white shadow with little liver spots that my spaniel dog and I picked up one night when we were going home.'

"Master," he said, "there's such an amusing cur out there in the middle of the road."

"Behave yourself! Don't pick up with anything you come across like this!"

"Master, I know it is a thin and dirty cur, but the creature follows me."

"Keep to heel! The poor dog will get lost if you entice him far from home."

"Oh, master! that's just what's so amusing. He hasn't any."

'And like a little ghost the white dog crept along behind. We looked to read his collar; it was gone. We took him home—and how he ate, and how he drank! But my spaniel said to me:

"Master, what is the use of bringing in a dog like this? Can't you see what he is like? He has eaten all my meat, drunk



## THE LOST DOG

my bowl dry, and now he is sleeping in my bed."

'I said to him: "My dear, you ought to like to give this up to this poor dog."

'And he said to me: "Master, I *don't*! He is no good, this dog; I am cleaner and fatter than he. And don't you know there's a place the other side of the water for all this class of dog? When are we going to take him there?"

'And I said to him: "My dear, don't ask me; *I don't know.*"' . . .

'And you are like that dog, standing there with those eyes of yours and that weak chin and those weak knees, before this half-built house with the winter coming on. And I am like my spaniel, who knows there is a proper place for all your kind of creature. Man! what shall I do with you?'

'I am a lost dog.'



# DEMOS



## II

### DEMOS

‘WELL, she’s my wife, ain’t she?’  
He put his hands on the handles of his barrow as though to take it away from one who could not see his point of view, wheeled it two yards, and stopped.

‘It’s no matter what I done to her. Look ’ere!’ He turned his fish-white face, and his dead eyes came suddenly to life, with a murky, yellow glare, as though letting escape the fumes within his soul. ‘I ought to ha’ put her to bed with a shovel long ago; and I will, too, first chance I get.’

‘You are talking like a madman.’

‘Look ’ere, ’as a man a right to his own wife an’ children?’ His thick loose lower lip trembled. ‘You tell me that!’

‘It depends on how he behaves himself. If you knock her about, you can’t expect her to stay with you.’

‘I never done no more to her than

## A COMMENTARY

what she deserved. I never gave her the 'alf o' what she ought to 'ave.'

'I've seen her several times with your marks on her face.'

'Yes, an' I'll mark 'er again, I will.'

'So you have just said.'

'Because a man 'its 'is wife when he's got a drop o' liquor in 'im, that don't give 'er the right to go off like this and take a man's children from 'im, do it?'

'I think it does.'

'When I find her——'

'I hope you will not find her.'

He thrust his head forward, and the yellow in the whites of his eyes deepened and spread till his whole face seemed suffused with it.

'Look 'ere, man an' wife is man an' wife, and don't you or any one come between 'em, or it'll be the worse for you.'

'I have told you my opinion.'

'You think I don't know the law; the law says his children belongs to a man, not to a woman.'

'We needn't go into that.'

'Needn't we? You think, becos I'm

## DEMOS

not a torf, I got no rights. I know what the law says. A man owns 'is wife, an' 'e owns 'is children.'

'Do you deny that you drink?'

'You'd drink if you 'ad my life; d'you think I like this goin' about all day with a barrer?'

'Do you deny that you've often struck your wife?'

'What's it to you or any one else, what I do to 'er in private? Why don't you come down to my place an' order me about?'

'But I suppose you know your wife can get a separation order if she goes down to the Court?'

On his face a grin stole up.

'Separation order! Do 'er a lot o' good, that would! D'you think that'd keep my 'ands off 'er afterwards? She knows what I'd do to 'er if she went against me.'

'What *would* you do?'

'She wouldn't want to arsk for any more separation orders.'

'You would be locked up if you molested her afterwards.'

## A COMMENTARY

‘Should I? *She* wouldn’t be there to speak against me.’

‘I understand.’

‘She knows what I’d do to ’er.’

‘You’ve scared her so that she daren’t go to the Court—she daren’t stay with you; what can she do but leave you?’

‘I don’t want ’er, let ’er go; I want the children.’

‘Do you really mean that you don’t want her?’

‘I never ’ad a woman keep *me*.’

‘You know that her earnings have kept you all.’

‘I tell you I never ’ad a woman keep me.’

‘Can you support the children?’

‘If I could get a proper job——’

‘But can you get a proper job?’

‘Well, ’oo’s fault is that; it’s not my fault, is it?’

‘You’ve had plenty of chances.’

‘’Oo cares if I ’ave! I’ve always been a good father to my children. I’ve worked for them, an’ begged for ’em, an’ stole for ’em; I’m well known to be a good father all about where I live.’



## DEMOS

‘But that won’t keep them off the parish, will it?’

‘You let the parish alone! If I’ve not got money, I’ve got honour; that’s better than all the money. I don’t want no money to tell me what’s right and what isn’t.’

‘Come, come!’

‘The children’s mine—every one o’ them. Takin’ children away from their father! that’s a fine thing to be backin’ up like this!’

His eyes moved from side to side, like the eyes of an animal in pain, and his voice was hoarse as though a lump had risen in his throat.

‘Look ’ere! I’m fonder of them children than what people might think. I’ll never sleep again till I know where they are.’

‘How can I tell you where they are without telling you where their mother is?’

‘They’re mine—the law gives ’em to me. ’Oo are you to go against the law?’

‘We went over that just now.’

‘When she married me she took me for

## A COMMENTARY

better or worse, didn't she? Man an' wife should settle their own affairs. 'They don't want no one else to interfere with them!'

'You want her back so that you can do what you like to her. Do you expect other people to help you to that?'

'Look 'ere! D'you think it's pleasant for me, when I go into the pub to 'ave 'em talk about *my wife* goin' off on 'er own? D'you think I 'aven't got enough to bear without that?'

'You ought to have thought of that before you drove her to it.'

'Oo says I drove 'er? Noos-bearin', talkin' about 'er, like what they are? She's lost 'er honour; d'you think that's pleasant for *me*?'

'No.'

'Well, then!' He came from between the handles of his barrow and stood on the edge of the pavement, and the movement of his shoulders was like the movement of a bull that is about to charge. 'Look 'ere! She's mine to do what I like with. I never injured any one that didn't injure me; but any one that injures me'll 'ave a

## DEMOS

funny piece o' cake to cut, what 'e'll never be able to swaller.'

'Who is injuring you?'

'An' don't you think I'm afraid o' the police. Not all the police in the world won't stop *me*!'

'Well?'

'You only listens to one side; if I was to tell you all I'd got against 'er——'

'You beat her—and you ask me to help you find her?'

'I'm arskin' you the whereabouts o' my children.'

'It's the same thing. Can't you see that no decent man would tell you?'

He plucked at his throat and stood silent, with a groping movement like a man suddenly realising that the darkness before him is not going to lift.

'It's all like a Secret Society to me! If I can't get 'em back, I can't bear meself.'

'How can it be otherwise?'

'You're all on 'er side. She's a disgrace, that's what *she* is, takin' 'em away from their 'ome, takin' 'em away from their father.'

## A COMMENTARY

‘She brought them into the world.’

‘When I find ’er, I’ll make ’er sorry she was ever brought into the world ’erself. I’ll let ’er know ’oo’s ’er master! She shan’t forget a second time! She’s mine, an’ the children’s mine!’

‘Well, I can’t help you.’

‘I stands on the law. The law gives ’em to me, and I’ll keep ’em. She knows better than to go to the Court against me—it means ’er last sleep.’

‘Good morning!’

He plucked at his neck again and ground the sole of his boot on the pavement, and the movement of his eyes was pitiful to see.

‘I’m ’alf out o’ meself, that’s what I am; I’ll never sleep until I find ’em. Look ’ere! *Tell* me where they are, sir?’

‘I am sorry, I cannot.’

In the unmoving fish-white face his dead eyes, straining in their sockets, began to glow again with that queer yellow glare, as though alive with the spirit that dwells where light has never come; the spirit that possesses those dim multitudes who

## DEMOS

know no influence but that of force, no reason, and no gentleness, since these have never come their way ; who know only that they must keep that little which they have, since that which they have not is so great and so desirable ; the dim multitudes who, since the world began, have lived from hand to mouth, like dogs crouched over their stale bones, snarling at such as would take those poor bones from them.

‘ I’m ’er ’usband, an’ I mean to ’ave ’er, alive or dead.’

And I saw that this was not a man who spoke, but the very self of the brute beast that lurks beneath the surface of our State ; the very self of the chained monster whom Nature tortures with the instinct for possession, and man with whips drives from attainment. And behind his figure in the broad flowery road I seemed to see the countless masses of his fellows filing out of their dark streets, out of their alleys and foul lodgings, in a never-ending river of half-human flesh, with their faces set one way. They covered the whole road, and every inlet was alive with them ; and all

## A COMMENTARY

the air was full of the dull surging of thousands more. Of every age, in every sort of rags; on all their faces the look that said: 'All my life I have been given that which will keep me alive, that, and no more. What I have got I have got; no one shall wrench it from my teeth! I live as the dogs; as the dogs shall my actions be! I am the brute beast; have I the time, the chance, the money to learn gentleness and decency? Let me be! Touch not my gnawed bones!'

They stood there—a great dark sea stretching out to the further limits of the sight; no sound came from their lips, but all their eyes glowed with that yellow glare, and I saw that if I took my glance off them they would spring at me.

'You defy me, Guv'nor?'

'I am obliged to.'

'One day I'll meet yer, then, for all your money, and I'll let yer know!'

He took up the handles of his barrow, and slowly, with a sullen lurch, wheeled it away, looking neither to his right nor left. And behind him, down the road with its gardens and tall houses, moved the millions

## DEMOS

of his fellows; and, as they passed in silence, each seemed to say :

‘ One day I’ll meet you, and—I’ll let you know !’

The road lay empty again beneath the sun; nursemaids wheeled their perambulators, the lilac-trees dropped blossom, the policemen at the corners wrote idly in their little books.

There was no sign of what had passed.





## OLD AGE



### III

#### OLD AGE

**H**E came running out of the darkness, and spoke at once: 'Go an' see my poor mother, gentleman; go and see my poor father an' mother!'

It was a snowy midnight; by the light of the street lamp he who made this strange request looked ragged and distraught.

'They lives in Gold Street, 22; go an' see 'em, gentleman. Mrs. James White—my poor mother starvin'.'

In England no one starves.

'Go an' see 'em, gentleman; it's the book o' truth I'm tellin' you. They're old; they got no food, they got nothin'.'

'Very well, I will.'

He thrust out his face to see whether he might trust his ears, then without warning turned and ran on down the road. His shape vanished into darkness, whence it came. . . .

Gold Street with its small grey houses

## A COMMENTARY

whose doors are always open, and its garbage-littered gutters, where children are at play.

‘ Mr. and Mrs. James White ? ’

‘ First floor back. Mr. White—wanted ! ’

My dog sniffed at the passage wall, that smelled unlike the walls belonging to him, and presently an old man came. He looked at us distrustfully, and we looked back distrustfully at him.

‘ Mr. James White ? ’

‘ Yes. ’

‘ Last night some one calling himself your son asked me to come up and see you. ’

‘ Come up, sir. ’

The room was unpapered, and not more than ten feet square ; it contained a double bed, over whose dirty mattress was stretched a black-brown rag ; a fireplace and no fire ; a saucepan, but nothing in it ; two cups, a tin or two, no carpet, a knife and spoon, a basin, some photographs, and rags of clothing ; all blackish and discoloured.

On a wooden chair before the hearth

## OLD AGE

was sitting an old woman whose brown-skinned face was crowsfooted all over. Her hair was white, and she had little bright grey eyes and a wart on one nostril. A dirty shawl was pinned across her chest ; this, with an old skirt and vest seemed all her clothing. The third finger of her left hand was encircled by a broad gold ring. There were two chairs, and the old man placed the other one for me, having rubbed it with his sleeve. My dog lay with his chin pressed to the ground, for the sights and scents of poverty displeased him.

‘ I’m afraid you’re down on your luck.’

‘ Yes, sir, we are down.’

Seated on the border of the bed, he was seen to be a man with features coloured greyish-dun by lack of food ; his weak hair and fringe of beard were touched with grey ; a dumb, long-suffering man from whom discouragement and want had planed away expression.

‘ How have you got into this state ?’

‘ The winter an’ my not gettin’ work.’

A whisper came from the old lady by the hearth :

‘ Father can work, sir ; oh ! ’e can work !’

## A COMMENTARY

‘ Yes, I can work ; I’m good for a day’s work at any time.’

‘ I’m afraid you don’t look it !’

His hand was shaking violently, and he tried to stop its movement.

‘ It’s a bit chilly ; I feels well enough in meself.’

More confidential came the old lady’s whisper :

‘ Father’s very good ’ealth, sir ; oh ! ’e can work. It’s not ’avin’ any breakfast that makes ’im go like that this weather.’

‘ But how old are you ?’

‘ Father’s seventy-one, sir, and I’m the same. Born within two months of each other—wasn’t we, father ?’

‘ Forgive my saying so, Mr. White, but, with all this competition, is there much chance of your getting work at that age ? What *are* you ?’

‘ Painter I am, sir ; take any work—I’m not particular. Mr. Williams gives me a bit when times are good, but the winter——’

‘ Father can work, sir ; oh ! ’e can work !’

‘ Thirty-three years I worked for one firm—thirty-three years.’

## OLD AGE

‘What firm was that?’

‘Thirty-three years—till they gave up business——’

‘But what firm——’

‘Answer the gentleman’s question. Father’s very slow, sir.’

‘Scotter’s, of John Street, that was—thirty-three years. Now they’ve given up.’

‘How long since they gave up?’

‘Three years.’

‘And how have you managed since?’

‘Just managed along—get some jobs in the summer—just managed along.’

‘You mustn’t mind father, sir. Why don’t you tell the gentleman? Just managed along, as you see, sir—everything’s gone now.’

She passed her hand over her mouth, and the sound of her whisper was more intimate than ever:

‘Dreadful things we’ve suffered in this room, sir; dreadful! I don’t like to speak of ’em, if you’ll believe me.’

And, with that almost soundless whisper, that stealthy movement of her hand before her mouth, all those things

## A COMMENTARY

she spoke of seemed to be happening in their deadly privacy to those two old people behind their close-shut door.

There was a silence; my dog spoke with his eyes: 'Master, we have been here long enough; I smell no food; there is no fire!'

'You must feel the cold dreadfully this weather?'

'We stays in bed as long as we can, sir—to keep warm, you know—to keep warm.'

The old man nodded from the black ruin of a bed.

'But I see you have no blankets.'

'All gone, sir—all gone!'

'Had you no savings out of that thirty-three years?'

'Family, sir—family; four sons an' two daughters; never more than thirty shillin's a week. He always gave me his wages—father always gave me his wages.'

'I never was one to drink.'

'Sober man, father; an' now he's old. But 'e can work, sir; 'e can work.'

'But can't your sons help you?'

'One's dead, sir; died of fever. And



## OLD AGE

one'—her withered finger touched her forehead—'not quite—you know, not quite——'

'The one I saw last night, I suppose?'

'Not quite—not since he was in the Army. A bit——' Again she touched her forehead.

'And the other two?'

'Good sons, sir; but large families, you know. Not able——'

'And the daughters?'

'One's dead, sir; the other's married, away.'

'Haven't you any one to fall back on?'

The old man interrupted heavily:

'No, sir; we haven't.'

'Father doesn't put things right, sir—let me speak to the gentleman! Tell you the truth, never 'ad the habit, sir; not accustomed to ask for things; never done it—couldn't!'

The old man spoke again:

'The Society looked into our case; 'ere's their letter. Owin' to my not 'avin' any savin's, we weren't thought fit for bein' 'elped, so they says 'ere. All my savin's is gone this year or more; what could I save, with six children?'

## A COMMENTARY

‘Father couldn’t save; ’e did ’is duty by them—’e couldn’t save. We’ve not been in the ’abit of askin’ people, sir; wouldn’t do such a thing—couldn’t!’

‘Well! You see they’ve made a start with Old Age pensions?’

The old man slowly answered:

‘I ’eard something—I don’t trouble about Politics.’

‘Father never was one for the public-house, sir; never.’

‘But you used to have a vote, of course?’

A smile came on his lips, and faded; and in that smile, not even ironical, he passed judgment on the centuries that had left him where he was.

‘I never bothered about them. I let that alone!’

And again he smiled. ‘I’ll be dead long before they reach *me*, I know that.’

‘The winter’s only half over. What are you going to do?’

‘Well, sir, I don’t know *what* we’re goin’ to do.’

‘Don’t you think that, all things considered, you’d be better off in the—in the Infirmary?’

Silence.

## OLD AGE

‘ You know they—they’re quite comfortable, and——’

Silence.

‘ It’s not as if there were any—any disgrace, or——’

Silence.

‘ Well ? ’

He rose and crossed over to the hearth, and my dog, disturbed, sniffed at his trousers. ‘ You are worn out,’ he seemed to say ; ‘ go where you ought to go, then my master will not have to visit you, and waste the time he owes to me.’ And he, too, rose and came and put his snout on my knee ; ‘ When I am old, master, you will still take care of me—that is understood between us. But this man has no one to take care of him. Let us go ! ’

The old man spoke at last :

‘ No, sir, I don’t want to go there ; I can work. I don’t want to go there.’

Beyond him the whisper rose :

‘ Father can work, sir ; ’e can work. So long as we get a crust of bread, we’d rather stay ’ere.’

‘ I’ve got *this*, but I can’t bring meself to use it. I can work ; I’ve always

## A COMMENTARY

worked.' He took out a piece of paper. It was an order admitting James White, aged 71, and Eliza White his wife, aged 71, into the local Workhouse; if used for purposes of begging to be destroyed.

'Father can work, sir; 'e can work. We seen dreadful times in this room, believe, me, sir, before we came to getting that. We don't want to go. I tell father I'd rather die out 'ere.'

'But you'd be so much more comfortable, Mrs. White; you must know that.'

'Yes, sir; but there it is—I don't want to, and father don't want to.'

'I can work; I can go about with a barrer, or anything.'

'But can you *live*?' .

'Well, sir, so long as we're alive. After that, I can't tell—they'll get us then, I suppose.'

And the whisper came :

'We can't 'elp it after that. As you see, sir—there's nothin' left, there's nothin' left.'

She raised her hand and pointed to the bed; and the sun, that had been hidden all the morning, broke through and glittered on her wedding ring.

# THE CAREFUL MAN

**E**



#### IV

#### THE CAREFUL MAN

**H**E came on one side of farmer stock who had married farmer stock since the invasion of the Saxons, and on the other side of county families who had married county families since the Norman conquest. He was born where the town ended and country life began, educated at a public school, and his father was a judge.

Being designed for a profession he had adopted it, keeping himself in hand, so as not to be unpleasantly professional. For, since the time when he was wheeled in perambulators he had never wanted to do anything too much. He had so completely seen the other side of being wheeled in perambulators that he had ever afterwards been loth to put himself in a position which made it needful for him to act with all his heart. His organs were in fact

## A COMMENTARY

remarkably adjusted. He had not too much head nor too much heart. He had not too much appetite, but he had appetite enough. When asked at lunch of which sweet he would partake, he would answer : ‘ A little of both, thanks ’ ; for nothing seemed to him in life so great a pity as to take one thing to the exclusion of another. The instinct was so founded in the very roots of him that he knew nothing of it ; and it was this unconsciousness which lent a simple strength to what might otherwise have seemed an undecided character.

His attitude to women was a guarded one. It was repugnant to him to have too much wife, and yet, not wife enough was also very painful ; and so he had devised a way out of his embarrassment by saying to himself : ‘ We two are only married to the extent that we desire to be ; we will do exactly as we like.’ And he found that by thinking this, and getting his wife, who was a clever woman, to *say* she thought it too, he remained extremely faithful. With regard to children, it had no doubt been difficult, for—after a year or two—to have children and not to have



## THE CAREFUL MAN

them had been found impossible. In this dilemma he had considered very seriously what course he should adopt, and having carefully weighed the pro's and con's had discovered them to be so very equal that he could come to no conclusion. In consequence of this he had two children; after which he found no difficulty in not wanting to have more.

The question of his residence had occasioned him some pain; for, supposing that he lived in town he missed the country, and supposing that he resided in the country he missed the town. He therefore lived a little in both town and country; so regulating things that when in London he wanted to be out, and when out of London he wanted to be in, which kept him healthy.

A moderate meat diet gave him a hankering after other diets, making him a vegetarian in theory, so that he was in accord with either school. He drank wine at times; at times he drank no wine; he smoked one cigar after every meal—no more, because more made him sick.

His feeling about money was that he

## A COMMENTARY

ought to have enough, in order to have no feeling about money ; and, to attain this vacuum, he mechanically restrained his wants, still more his wife's—for, not being so beautifully adjusted as himself, when she wanted things, she *wanted* them.

In matters of religion he would not commit himself to any definite opinions. If asked whether he thought there were a future life, he would say: ' I see no reason to believe there is ; on the other hand, I see no object in believing that there isn't ; there may be, or there may not be ; or, again, there may be a future life for some, no future life for others—a little of both, perhaps.'

Dogma of any sort, of course, he found offensive—you were committed by it, and to be committed was both repulsive and absurd.

Once or twice only in his life had he seriously felt careless, and these were on occasions when he found his carelessness was threatened by some person or event that tried to tie him down.

There was in him a sort of terror of being bound to anything ; and when he

## THE CAREFUL MAN

was returned to Parliament, which happened after he was forty, he felt a natural uneasiness. Was he committed ; if so, what was he committed to ? Could he still get down on either side ; and suppose he did get down, could he at once get up again ? And he was happy when he found he could.

*It was remarkable how national he was.*

Yet he was not entirely conscious of his importance to the State, not recognising perhaps sufficiently how many other men were like him in every walk of life—not recognising that he was, in truth, the solid centre of the nation's pudding.

There was a word that he had early learnt to spell ; it started with a C, the second letter was an O, the third an M, the fourth a P, the fifth an R, the sixth an O, the seventh M, the eighth an I, the ninth an S, the last an E. Once learnt, soon after he escaped from perambulators, that word was never more forgot. He took it to his office, he took it to his Church, he took it into bed with him at nights. And now that he had become a

## A COMMENTARY

public man he took it to the House. But, having a regard, a veneration, for the figure of John Bull—that Myth who never modified his views, but held on fast to his ideals in spite of all the dogs of war—he preferred, whenever he was forced to act, to *say* that he had acted on his principles—and so, in truth, he had, for the deepest of his principles was the intimate belief that there was no such thing as principle.

This it was that gave him his pre-eminence in politics, for, seated in the very centre of the seesaw, being the first to feel and answer to, he was the least affected by, its motion. By shifting just a little, and instinctively, he kept the whole machine together, having all the time a quiet contempt for the two ends that would keep swinging to the skies or bumping on the ground. Nothing could be done without him in that House, because he was so plentiful; and very little with him.

He had a sense of humour, and devoted it to seeing all the fun there was in ‘cranks,’ and in extravagance of every kind. Never was he more amused than when he saw a person really give himself

## THE CAREFUL MAN

to anything ; he would sit, sometimes with his hat on and sometimes with it off, watching with a quiet smile to see the fellow bump ; and the bigger the bump was, the funnier he found it ! But for such as smiled at careful men he had a feeling that you could not take them seriously ; it was their little joke, and not a very good one ; and especially he wondered how people could be found foolish enough to place these persons in an Institution where care was of the essence of the atmosphere. Confident, however, that their want of care would soon undo them, he did not trouble much.

Phrases such as ‘There is no middle policy’ sometimes carried him away for quite five minutes ; but he invariably came back in time to find there was. It had, in fact, long been a fixed and firm belief with him that he could make omelettes without breaking eggs, and though he clearly made no omelettes, on the other hand he broke no eggs. Nor did he ever fracture his belief that he was just about to make an omelette. And after all, an omelette, even if you made it, what did it

## A COMMENTARY

amount to? There it was! You ate it, and had to make another! Better far to fix an omelette in your mind, and keep it there unmade. But discussion on the omelette's composition he was always ready to encourage; and, sitting with his eye cocked at the ingredients, he would talk them over very carefully, and now and then break off a sprig of parsley, so that the omelette really did advance—but not too fast. Sometimes he was even known to contemplate the omelette all the night, but this he only did because he was so very much afraid that if he left it somebody would cook the thing; and he would go home in the early morning to his wife, complaining rather bitterly that with a little care all this excessive cooking in the House might be avoided.

Take him for all in all, he was not original in mind, and yet he was no flunkey, serving mortal masters; he served a nobler one than they—the great god Opportunity. But it was not safe to tell him this, for though there was no reason in the world why he should dislike its being known that he acted in accordance with his nature,

## THE CAREFUL MAN

somehow he did not like it. This was, no doubt, an instance of his care.

Hardly any social measure could be brought to his attention with which he did not feel a certain meed of sympathy. If, for instance, somebody proposed a scheme of Old-Age Pensions, he would give a careful nod, and wait, because he knew that when somebody got up and said that this was dangerous, he should agree with him; or, again, if it were suggested that children should be made less hungry out of the public rates, he approved, but not too much, because he felt that to approve too much would interfere with his approval of the plan that they should not be fed out of the public rates. 'A little bit of both,' would be his thought, and by this masterly decision, which was often called his common-sense, he infallibly secured possession to the children of a little bit of neither; but, as he very justly said, to grant the first was too progressive; to grant the second, retrograde. And so with every other measure.

His leaders on both sides had learned from long experience the daintiness of his

## A COMMENTARY

digestion ; how very sensitive it was to motion ; how, if jolted, it revolted ; and so they did not try too hard to jolt it now, for they naturally hated to be cast into the air. They appreciated, too, his sterling worth—without him they felt the country would improve too fast.

And those leaders of his would look at him. With his eyelids lowered, but his eyes a little anxious, with his lips pinched in, and yet half-smiling, in an overcoat of medium weight, put on or taken off according to the weather, he sat, not very often opening his mouth. Behind his grey and unobtrusive figure they saw the masses of grey, unobtrusive, careful men, and a little shiver would run down their spines.

Too often had they awakened from their dreams and seen him sitting there, under a tall grey tower with a clock that faced all ways, bench upon bench, row after row, by day, by night, one eye of him on one side, and one eye on the other, and his nose between them in the middle.



# FEAR



## V

### FEAR

**I** SAW him first on a Spring day—one of those days when the limbs are lazy with delicious tiredness, the air soft and warm against the face, the heart full of a queer longing to know the hearts of other men.

He was quite a little man, with broad, high shoulders, and hardly any neck; and what was noticeable in his square, wooden-looking figure, dressed in light, shabby tweed, and patched, yellow boots, was that he seemed to have no chest. He was flat—from his white face, with its sandy hair, moustache, and eyebrows, under an old, narrow-brimmed straw hat, right down to his feet. It was as though life had planed him. His face, too, seemed to have lost all but its bones and skin of yellow-white; there were no eyelashes to his reddish-brown round eyes; there was no colour in his thin lips, compressed as

## A COMMENTARY

though to keep the secret of a mortal fear. Save for the wheeze and rustle of his breathing, he stood very still, nervously rubbing his claw-like hands up and down his trouser-legs. His voice was hoarse and faint.

‘Yes, I was a baker,’ he said. ‘They tell me as how that’s where I’ve done myself the harm. But I never learnt another trade; I was afraid that if I give it up I wouldn’t get no other work. Bakin’s not good for——’

He laid his thin, yellow fingers where there was so little left to lay them on.

‘There’s my wife and child,’ he went on in his matter-of-fact voice; ‘I’m fair frightened. If I could give up thinking of what’s coming to them, I believe that I’d feel better. But what am I to do? All my savin’s have gone now; I’m selling off my things, an’ when I’m through with that—there we shall be.’

His unlovely little face, with its hard-bitten lips and lashless eyes, quivered all over suddenly, as though within him all his fear had risen up, seized on his features, and set them to a dance of agony; but

## FEAR

they were soon still again. Stillness was the only possible condition for a face covering such thoughts as he had had.

‘I don’t sleep for thinkin’ of it—that’s against me!’

Yes—that was against him, considering the condition of his health. Any doctor would have told him to sleep well; that sleep, in fact, was quite essential. And I seemed to see him lying on his back, staring at the darkness, with those lashless, red-rimmed eyes, trying to find in its black depths something that was not there—the wan glow of a livelihood of some kind for his wife and child.

‘I gets in such a muck o’ sweat, worrying about what’s going to come to them with me like this; it quite exhausts me, it does really. You wouldn’t believe how weak I was!’

And one could not help reminding him that he ought not to worry—it was very bad for him.

‘Yes, I know that; I don’t think I can last long at this rate.’

‘If you could give up worrying, you would get well much quicker!’

## A COMMENTARY

He answered by a look of such humble and unconscious irony as one may see on the faces of the dead before their last wonder at the end has faded from them.

‘They tells me up at the hospital to eat well!’

And, looking at this meagre little man, it seemed that the advice was sound. Good food, and plenty of it!

‘I’ve been doing the best I can, of course.’ He made this statement without sarcasm, in a voice that seemed to say: ‘This world I live in is, of course, a funny world; the sort of fun it likes may be first-rate, but if I were once to begin to laugh at it, where could I stop—I ask you—where?’

‘Plenty of milk they tell me is the best thing I can take, but the child she’s bound to have as much as we can manage to buy. At her age, you see, she needs it. Of course, if I could get a job!—I’d take anything—I’d drive a baker’s cart!’

He lifted his little pipes of arms, and let them fall again, and God knows what he meant by such a motion, unless it were to show his strength.

## FEAR

‘Of course, some days,’ he said, ‘I can hardly get my breath at all, and that’s against me.’

It would be, as he said, against him; and, encouraged by a look, he added:

‘I know I kep’ on too long with my profession; but you know what it is—when you’ve been brought up to a job you get to depend on it; to give it up is like chuckin’ of yourself away. And that’s what I’ve found—people don’t want such as I am now.’

And for a full half-minute we stood looking at each other; his bitten, discoloured lips twitched twice, and a faint pink warmed the paper whiteness of his cheeks.

‘Up at the hospital they don’t seem to take no interest in my case any more; seems as if they thought it ’opeless.’

Unconscious that he had gone beneath the depths of human nature, shown up the human passion for definite success, illustrated human worship of the idol strength, and human scorn for what is weak—he said these simple words in an almost injured tone. Recovery might be impos-

## A COMMENTARY

sible, people did not want such as he was now ; but he was still interested in himself, still loth to find himself a useless bee ejected from the hive. His lashless eyes seemed saying: 'I believe I could get well—I do believe I could !'

Yet he was not unreasonable, for he went on :

'When I first went there they took a lot of interest in me—but that's a year ago. Perhaps I've disappointed them !'

Perhaps he had !

'They keep on telling me to take plenty of fresh air. Where I live, of course, there's not so very much about, but I take all I can. Not bein' able to get a job, I've been sitting in the Park. I take the child—they tell me not to have her too near me in the house.'

And I had a vision of this man of leisure sitting in the Park, rubbing his hands stealthily to keep them dry, and watching with red eyes the other men of leisure ; too preoccupied to wonder even why his leisure was not like theirs.

'Days like this,' he said, 'it's warm



## FEAR

enough ; but I can't enjoy them for thinking of what's coming.'

His glance wandered to the pear-trees in the garden—they were all in blossom, and lighted by the sun ; he looked down again a little hastily. A blackbird sang beyond the further wall. 'The little baker passed his tongue over his lips.

'I'm a countryman by birth,' he said ; 'it's like the country here. If I could get a job down in the country I should pick up, perhaps. Last time I was in the country I put on 'alf a stone. But who'd take me ?'

Again he raised his little pipes of arms ; this time it was clearly not to show his strength. No—he seemed to say : 'No one would take me ! I have found that out—I have found out all there is to know. I am done for !'

'That's about where it is,' he said ; 'and I wouldn't care so much, but for the baby and my wife. I don't see what I could ha' done, other than what I have done. God knows I kept on at it till I couldn't keep on no longer.'

And as though he knew that he was

## A COMMENTARY

again near that point when a hundred times he had broken into private agony, seen by no creature but himself, he stared hard at me, and his red moustache bristled over his sunken, indrawn lips.

A pigeon flew across; settling on a tree in the next garden it began to call its mate; and suddenly there came into my mind the memory of a thrush that, some months before, had come to the garden bed where we were standing, and all day long would hide and hop there, avoiding other birds, with its feathers all staring and puffed out. I remembered how it would let us take it up, and the film that kept falling on its eyes, and its sick heart beating so faintly beneath our hands; no bird of all the other birds came near it—knowing that it could no longer peck its living, and was going to die.

One day we could not find it; the next day we found it under a bush, dead.

‘I suppose it’s human nature not to take me on, seein’ the state I’m in,’ the little baker said. ‘I don’t want to be a trouble to no one, I’m sure; I’ve always

## FEAR

kept myself, ever since I was that high,' he put his hand out level with his waist; 'and now I can't keep myself, let alone the wife and child. It's the coming to the end of everything—it's the seeing of it coming. Fear—that's what it is! But I suppose I'm not the only one.'

And for the moment he seemed comforted by this thought that there were thousands of other working creatures, on whose shoulders sat the grinning cat of mortal illness, all staring with him at utter emptiness—thousands of other working creatures who were dying because fear had made them work too long. His face brightened ever so little, as though the sun had found a way to him. But suddenly that wooden look, the only safe and perfect look, came back to his features. One could have sworn that fear had never touched him, so expressionless, so still was he!



# FASHION



## VI

### FASHION

I HAVE watched you this ten minutes, while your carriage has been standing still, and have seen your smiling face change twice, as though you were about to say : ‘ I am not accustomed to be stopped like this ’ ; but what I have chiefly noticed is that you have not looked at anything except the persons sitting opposite and the backs of your flunkeys on the box. Clearly nothing has distracted you from following your thought : ‘ There is pleasure before me, I am told ! ’ Yours is the three-hundredth carriage in this row that blocks the road for half a mile. In the two hundred and ninety-nine that come before it, and the four hundred that come after, you are sitting too—with your face before you, and your unseeing eyes.

Resented while you gathered being ; brought into the world with the most distinguished skill ; remembered by your

## A COMMENTARY

mother when the whim came to her; taught to believe that life consists in caring for your clean, well-nourished body, and your manner that nothing usual can disturb; taught to regard Society as the little ring of men and women that you see, and to feel your only business is to know the next thing that you want and get it given you — *You have never had a chance!*

You take commands from no other creature; your heart gives you your commands, forms your desires, your wishes, your opinions, and passes them between your lips. From your heart well-up the springs that feed the river of your conduct; but your heart is a stagnant pool that has never seen the sun. Each year when April comes, and the earth smells new, you have an odd aching underneath your corsets. What is it for? You have a husband, or a lover, or both, or neither, whichever suits you best; you have children, or could have them if you wished for them; you are fed at stated intervals with food and wine; you have all you want of country life and country sports; you have the theatre and the opera, books,



## FASHION

music, and religion ! From the top of the plume, torn from a dying bird, or the flowers, made at an insufficient wage, that decorate your head, to the sole of the shoe that cramps your foot, you are decked out with solemn care ; a year of labour has been sewn into your garments and forged into your rings—you are a breathing triumph !

You live in the centre of the centre of the world ; if you wish you can have access to everything that has been thought since the world of thought began ; if you wish you can see everything that has ever been produced, for you can travel where you like ; you are within reach of Nature's grandest forms and the most perfect works of art. You can hear the last word that is said on everything, if you wish. When you do wish, the latest tastes are servants of your palate, the latest scents attend your nose——*You have never had a chance !*

For, sitting there in your seven hundred carriages, you are blind—in heart, and soul, and voice, and walk ; the blindest creature in the world. Never for one minute of your little life have you thought, or done,

## A COMMENTARY

or spoken for yourself. You have been prevented; and so wonderful is this plot to keep you blind that you have not a notion it exists. To yourself your sight seems good, such is your pleasant thought. Since you cannot even see this hedge around you, how can there be anything the other side? The ache beneath your corsets in the spring is all you are ever to know of what there is beyond. And no one is to blame for this—you least of all.

It was settled, long before the well-fed dullard's kiss from which you sprang. Forces have worked, in dim, inexorable progress, from the remotest time till they have bred you, little blind creature, to be the masterpiece of their creation. With the wondrous subtlety of Fate's selection, they have paired and paired all that most narrowly approaches to the mean, all that by nature shirks the risks of living, all that by essence clings to custom, till they have secured a state of things which has assured your coming, in your perfection of nonentity. They have planted you apart in your expensive mould, and still they are at work—these gardeners never idle—

## FASHION

pruning and tying night and day to prevent your running wild. The Forces are proud of you—their waxen, scentless flower!

The sun beats down, and still your carriage does not move; and this delay is getting on your nerves. You cannot imagine what is blocking-up your way! Do you ever imagine anything? If all those goodly coverings that contain you could be taken off, what should we find within the last and inmost shell—a little soul that has lost its power of speculation. A soul that was born in you a bird and has become a creeping thing; wings gone, eyes gone, groping, and clawing with its tentacles what is given it.

You stand up, speaking to your coachman! And you are charming, standing there, to us who, like your footman, cannot see the label 'Blind.' The cut of your gown is perfect, the dressing of your hair the latest, the trimming of your hat is later still; your trick of speech the very thing; you droop your eyelids to the life; you have not too much powder; it is a lesson in grace to see you hold your

## A COMMENTARY

parasol. The doll of Nature! So, since you were born; so, until you die! And, with his turned, clean-shaven face, your footman seems to say: 'Madam, how you have come to be it is not my province to inquire. You are! I am myself dependent on you!' You are the heroine of the farce, but no one smiles at you, for you are tragic, the most tragic figure in the world. No fault of yours that ears and eyes and heart and voice are atrophied so that you have no longer spirit of your own!

Fashion brought you forth, and she has seen to it that you are the image of your mother, knowing that if she made you by a hair's-breadth different, you would see what she is like and judge her. You are Fashion, Fashion herself, blind, fear-full Fashion! You do what you do because others do it; think what you think because others think it; feel what you feel because others feel it. You are the Figure without eyes.

And no one can reach you, no one can alter you, poor little bundle of others' thoughts; for there is nothing left to reach.

## FASHION

In your seven hundred carriages, you pass; and the road is bright with you. Above that road, below it, and on either hand, are the million things and beings that you cannot see; all that is organic in the world, all that is living and creating, all that is striving to be free. You pass, glittering, on your round, the sightless captive of your own triumph; and the eyes of the hollow-chested work-girls on the pavement fix on you a thousand eager looks, for you are strange to them. Many of their hearts are sore with envy; they do not know that you are as dead as snow around a crater; they cannot tell you for the nothing that you are—Fashion! The Figure without eyes!



# **SPORT**





## VII

### SPORT

**O**FTEN in the ride of some Scotch wood I used to stand, clutching my gun, with eyes moving from right to left, from left to right. Every nerve and fibre of my body would receive and answer to the slightest movements, the smallest noises, the faintest scents. The acrid sweetness of the spruce-trees in the mist, the bite of innumerable midges, the feel of the deep, wet, mossy heather underfoot, the brown-grey twilight of the wood, the stillness—these were poignant as they never will be again. And slowly, back of that stillness, the noises of the beaters would begin. Gentle and regular, at first—like the ending of a symphony rather than its birth—they would swell, then drop and fade away completely. In that unexpected silence a squirrel scurried out along a branch, sat a moment looking, and scurried back; or, with its soft, blunt flight, an owl would fly across.

## A COMMENTARY

Then, with a shrill, far ‘Mar-r-rk!’ the beaters’ chorus would rise again, drowned for an instant by the crack of the keepers’ guns; louder and louder it came, rhythmically, inexorably nearer. In the ride little shivers of wind shook the drops of warm mist off the needles of the spruce, and a half-veiled sun faintly warmed and coloured everything. Stealing through heather and fern would come a rabbit, confiding in the space before him and the ride where he was wont to sun himself. At a shot he flung his mortal somersault, or disappeared into a burrow, reached too soon. To see him lie there dead in the brown-grey twilight of the trees would give one a strange pleasure—a feeling such as some casual love affair will give a man, the pleasure of a primitive virility expressed—but to watch him disappear into the earth would irritate, for he had got his death, and, dead within the earth, he would not do one any sort of credit. Nor was it nice to think that he was dying slowly, so one forbore to think.

Sometimes we did not shoot at such small stuff, but waited for the roedeer,

## SPORT

These dun familiars of the wood were very shy, clinging to the deepest thickets, treading with gentle steps, invisible as spirits, and ever trying to break back. Now and then, leaping forward with hind-quarters higher than its shoulders, one of them would face the line of beaters, and then would arise the strangest noises above the customary sounds and tappings—cries of fierce resentment that such fine ‘game’ should thus escape the guns. When the creature crossed the line these cries swelled into a long, continuous, excited shriek; and, as the yells died out in muttering, I used to feel a hollow sense of disappointment.

When the beat was over they would collect the birds and beasts which had fulfilled their destiny, and place them all together. Half hidden by the bracken or deep heather the little bodies lay, abandoned to the ground with the wonderful strange limpness of dead things. We stood looking at them in the misty air, acrid with the fragrance of the spruce-trees; and each of us would feel a vague strange thirst, a longing to be again

## A COMMENTARY

standing in the rides with the cries of the beaters in our ears, and creatures coming closer, closer to our guns.

Often in the police-courts I have sat, while they drove another kind of 'game.'

It would be quiet in there but for the whisperings and shufflings peculiar to all courts of law. Through the high-placed windows a grey light fell impartially, and in it everything looked hard and shabby. The air smelled of old clothes, and now and then, when the women were brought in, of the corpse of some sweet scent.

Through a door on the left-hand side they would drive these women, one by one, often five or six, even a dozen, in one morning. Some of them would come shuffling forward to the dock with their heads down; others walked boldly; some looked as if they must faint; some were hard and stoical as stone. They would be dressed in black, quite neatly; or in cheap, rumpled finery; or in skimped, mud-stained garments. Their faces were of every type—dark and short, with high cheekbones; blowsy from drink; long,

## SPORT

worn, and raddled ; one here and there like a wild fruit ; and many bestially insensible, devoid of any sort of beauty.

They stood, as in southern countries one may see mules or asses, harnessed to too-heavy loads of wood or stone, stand, utterly unmoving, with a mute submissive viciousness. Now and then a girl would turn half round towards the public, her lips smiling defiantly, but her eyes never resting for a moment, as though knowing well enough there was no place where they *could* rest. The next to her would seem smitten with a sort of deathlike shame, but there were not many of this kind, for they were those whom the beaters had driven in for the first time. Sometimes they refused to speak. As a rule they gave their answers in hard voices, their sullen eyes lowered ; then, having received the meed of justice, went shuffling or flaunting out.

They were used to being driven, it was their common lot ; a little piece of sport growing more frequent with each year that intervened between their present and that moment when some sportsman first

## A COMMENTARY

caught sight of them and started out to bring them down. From most of them that day was now distant by many thousand miles of pavement, so far off that it was hard work to remember it. What sport they had afforded since ! Yet not one of all their faces seemed to show that they saw the fun that lay in their being driven in like this. They were perhaps still grateful, some of them, at the bottom of their hearts for that first moment when they came shyly towards the hunter, who stood holding his breath for fear they should not come ; unable from their natures to believe that it was not their business to attract and afford him sport. But suddenly in a pair of greenish eyes and full lips sharpened at their corners, behind the fading paint and powder on a face, one could see the huntress—the soul as of a stealing cat, waiting to flesh its claws in what it could, driven by some deep, insatiable instinct. This one too had known sport ; she had loved to spring and bring down the prey just as we who brought her here had loved to hunt her. Nature had put sport into her heart and

## SPORT

into ours ; and behind that bold or cringing face there seemed to lurk this question : ' I only did what you do—what nearly every man of you has done a little, in your time. I only wanted a bit of sport, like you : that's human nature, isn't it ? Why do you bring me here, when you don't bring yourselves ! Why do you allow me in certain bounds to give you sport, and trap me outside those bounds like vermin ? When I was beautiful—and I *was* beautiful—it was you who begged of me ! I gave, until my looks were gone. Now that my looks are gone, I have to beg you to come to me, or I must starve ; and when I beg, you bring me here. That's funny isn't it, d——d funny ! I'd laugh, if laughter earned my living ; but I can't afford to laugh, my fellow-sportsmen—the more there are of you the better for me until I'm done for ! '

Silently we men would watch—as one may watch rats let out of a cage to be pounced on by a terrier—their frightened, restless eyes cowed by coming death ; their short, frantic rush, soon ended ; their tossed, limp bodies ! On some of our

## A COMMENTARY

faces was a jeering curiosity, as though we were saying : ' Ah ! we thought that you would come to this.' A few faces—not used to such a show—were darkened with a kind of pity. The most were fixed and hard and dull, as of men looking at hurtful things they own and cannot do without. But in all our unmoving eyes could be seen that tightening of fibre, that tenseness, which is the mark of sport. The beaters had well done their work ; the game was driven to the gun !

It was but the finish of the hunt, the hunt that we had started, one or other of us, some fine day, the sun shining and the blood hot, wishing no harm to any one, but just a little sport.



**MONEY**



## VIII

### MONEY.

**E**VERY night between the hours of two and four he would wake, and lie sleepless, and all his monetary ghosts would come and visit him. If, for instance, he had just bought a house and paid for it, any doubt he had conceived at any time about its antecedents or its future would suddenly appear, squatting on the foot-rail of his bed, staring in his face. There it would grow, until it seemed to fill the room; and terror would grip his heart. The words: 'I shall lose my money,' would leap to his lips; but in the dark it seemed ridiculous to speak them. Presently beside that doubt more doubts would squat. Doubts about his other houses, about his shares; misgivings as to Water Boards; terrors over Yankee Rails. They took, fantastically, the shape of owls, clinging in a line and swaying, while from their

## A COMMENTARY

wide black gaps of mouth would come the silent chorus: 'Money, money, you'll lose all your money!' His heart would start thumping and fluttering; he would turn his old white head, bury his whisker in the pillow, shut his eyes, and con over such investments as he really could not lose. Then, beside his head half-hidden in the pillow, there would come and perch the spectral bird of some unlikely liability, such as a lawsuit that might drive him into bankruptcy; while, on the other side, touching his silver hair, would squat the yellow fowl of Socialism. Between these two he would lie unmoving, save for that hammering of his heart, till at last would come a drowsiness, and he would fall asleep. . . .

At such times it was always of his money and his children's and grandchildren's money that he thought. It was useless to tell himself how few his own wants were, or that it might be better for his children to have to make their way. Such thoughts gave him no relief. His fears went deeper than mere facts; they were religious, as it were, and founded in

## MONEY

an innermost belief that, by money only, Nature could be held at bay.

Of this, from the moment when he first made money, his senses had informed him, and slowly, surely, gone on doing so, till his very being was soaked through with the conviction. He might be told on Sundays that money was not everything, but he knew better. Seated in the left-hand aisle, he seemed lost in reverence—a grandchild on either hand, his old knees in quiet trousers, crossed, his white-fringed face a little turned towards the preacher, one neat-gloved hand reposing on his thigh, the other keeping warm a tiny hand thrust into it. But his old brain was far away, busy amongst the Tables of Commandment, telling him how much to spend to get his five per cent. and money back; his old heart was busy with the little hand tucked into his. There was nothing in such sermons therefore that could quarrel with his own religion, for he did not hear them; and even had he heard them, they would not have quarrelled, his own creed of money being but the natural modern form of a religion that his fathers had

## A COMMENTARY

interpreted as the laying-up of treasure in the life to come. He was only able nowadays to *say* that he believed in any life to come, so that his commercialism had been forced to find another outlet, and advance a step, in accordance with the march of knowledge.

His religious feeling about money did not make him selfish, or niggardly in any way—it merely urged him to preserve himself—not to take risks that he could reasonably avoid, either in his mode of life, his work, or in the propagation of his children. He had not married until he had a position to offer to the latter, sufficiently secure from changes and chances in this mortal life, and even then he had not been too precipitate, confining the number to three boys, and one welcome girl, in accordance with the increase of his income. In the circles where he moved, his course of action was so normal that no one had observed the mathematical connection between increasing income and the production and education of his family. Still less had any one remarked the deep and silent process by which there passed from

## MONEY

him to them the simple elements of faith.

His children, subtly, and under cover of the manner of a generation which did not mention money in so many words, had sucked in their father's firm religious instinct, his quiet knowledge of the value of the individual life, his steady and unconscious worship of the means of keeping it alive. Calmly they had sucked it in, and a thing or two besides. So long as he was there they knew they could afford to make a little free with what must come to them by virtue of his creed. When quite small children, they had listened, rather bored, to his simple statements about money and the things it bought; presently that instinct—shared by the very young with dogs and other animals—for having of the best and consorting with their betters, had helped them to see the real sense of what he said. As time went on, they found gentility insisting more and more that this instinct should be concealed; and they began unconsciously to perfect their father's creed, draping its formal tenets in the undress of an apparent disregard. For

## A COMMENTARY

the dogma, 'Not worth the money !' they would use the words, 'Not good enough !' The teaching, 'Business first,' they formulated, 'Not more pleasure than your income can afford, your health can stand, or your reputation can assimilate.' There was money waiting for them, and they did not feel it necessary to undertake even those 'safe' risks which their father had been obliged to take, to make that money. But they were quite to be depended on. In the choosing of their friends, their sports, their clubs, and occupations, a religious feeling guided them. They knew precisely just how much their income was, and took care neither to spend more nor less. And so devoutly did they act up to their principles, that, whether in the restaurant or country house, whether in the saleroom of a curio shop, whether in their regiments or their offices, they could always feel the presence of the godhead blessing their discreet and comfortable worship. In one respect, indeed, they were more religious than their father, who still preserved the habit of falling on his knees at night, to name with Tibetan



## MONEY

regularity a strange god; they did not speak to him about this habit, but they wished he would not do it, being fond of their old father, who continued them into the past. They had gently laughed him out of talking about money, they had gently laughed at him for thinking of it still; but they loved him, and it worried them in secret that he should do this thing, which seemed to them dishonest.

With their wives and husband—in course of time they had all married—they very often came to see him, bringing their children. To the old man these little visitors were worth more than all hydro-pathy; to help in playing with the toys that he himself had given them, to stroke his grandsons' yellow heads, and ride them on his knee; to press his silver whiskers to their ruddy cheeks, pinching their little legs to feel how much there was of them, and loving them the more, the more there was to love—this made his heart feel warm. The dearest moments he knew now, the consolation of his age, were those he spent reflecting how—of the young things he loved, who seemed to love him too a little

## A COMMENTARY

—not one would have secured to him or her less than twelve or thirteen hundred pounds a year ; more, if he could manage to hold on a little longer. For fifty years at least the flesh and blood he left behind would be secure. His eye and mind, quick to notice things like that, had soon perceived the difference of the younger generation's standards from his own ; his children had perhaps a deeper veneration for the means of living while they were alive, but certainly less faith in keeping up their incomes after they were in their graves. And so, unconsciously, his speculation passed them by, and travelled to his grandchildren, telling itself that these small creatures who nestled up against him, and sometimes took him walks, would, when they came to be grown men and women, have his simpler faith, and save the money that he left them, for their own grandchildren. Thus, and thus only, would he live, not fifty years, but a hundred, after he was dead. But he was rendered very anxious by the law, which refused to let him tie his money up in perpetuity.

Firm in his determination to secure

## MONEY

himself against the future, he opposed this strenuous piety to those temptations which beset the individual, refusing numberless appeals, often much against his instincts of compassion ; opposing with his vote and all his influence movements to increase the rates or income-tax for such purposes as the raising of funds to enable aged people without means to die more slowly. He himself, who laid up yearly more and more for the greater safety of his family, felt, no doubt—though cynicism shocked him—that these old persons were only an encumbrance to *their* families, and should be urged to dwindle gently out. In such private cases as he came across, feeling how hard it was, he prayed for strength to keep his hand out of his pocket, and strength was often given him. So with many other invitations to depart from virtue. He fixed a certain sum a year—a hundred pounds—with half-a-crown in the velvet bag on Sundays—to be offered as libations to all strange gods, so that they might leave him undisturbed to worship the true god of money. This was effectual ; the strange gods, finding him a man

## A COMMENTARY

of strong religious principle, yet no crank—his name appeared in twenty charitable lists, five pounds apiece—soon let him be, for fear of wasting postage stamps and the under parts of boots.

After his wife's death, which came about when he was seventy, he continued to reside alone in the house that he had lived in since his marriage, though it was now too large for him. Every autumn he resolved to make a change next spring; but when spring came, he could not bring himself to tear his old roots up, and put it off till the spring following, with the hope, perhaps, that he might then feel more inclined.

All through the years that he was living there alone, he suffered more and more from those nightly visitations of monetary doubts. They seemed, indeed, to grow more concrete and insistent with every thousand pounds he put between himself and their reality. They became more owl-like, more numerous, with each fresh investment; they stayed longer at a time. And he grew thinner, frailer every year; pouches came beneath his eyes.

## MONEY

When he was eighty, his daughter, with her husband and children, came to live with him. This seemed to give him a fresh lease of life. He never missed, if he could help it, a visit to the nursery at five o'clock. There, surrounded by toy bricks, he would remain an hour or more, building — Banks or houses, ships or churches, sometimes police-stations, sometimes cemeteries, but generally Banks. And when the edifice approached completion, in the glory of its long white bricks, he waited with a sort of secret ecstasy to feel a small warm body climb his back, and hear a small voice say in his ear: 'What shall we put in the Bank to-day, Granddy?'

The first time this was asked, he had hesitated long before he answered. During the thirty years that had elapsed since he built Banks for his own children, he had learned that one did not talk of money now, especially before the young. One used a euphemism for it. The proper euphemism had been slow to spring into his mind, but it had sprung at last; and they had placed it in the Bank. It was a

## A COMMENTARY

very little china dog. They placed it in the entrance hall.

The small voice said: 'What is it guarding?'

He had answered: 'The Bank, my darling.'

The small voice murmured: 'But nobody could steal the Bank.'

Looking at the little euphemism, he had frowned. It lacked completeness as a symbol. For a moment he had a wild desire to put a sixpence down, and end the matter. Two small knees wriggled against his back, arms tightened round his neck, a chin rubbed itself impatiently against his whisker. He muttered hastily:

'But they could steal the papers.'

'What papers?'

'The wills, and deeds, and—and cheques.'

'Where are they?'

'In the Bank.'

'I don't see them.'

'They're in a cupboard.'

'What are they for?'

'For—for grown-up people.'

'Are they to play with?'

## MONEY

‘NO!’

‘Why is he guarding them?’

‘So that—so that everybody can always have enough to eat.’

‘Everybody?’

‘Everybody.’

‘Me, too?’

‘Yes, my darling; you, of course.’

Locked in each other’s arms they looked down sidelong at the little euphemism. The small voice said:

‘Now that *he’s* there, they’re safe, aren’t they?’

‘Quite safe.’

He had given up attending to his business, but almost every morning, at nearly the same hour, he would walk down to his club, not looking very much at things about the streets, partly because his thoughts were otherwise engaged, partly because he had found it from the first a deleterious habit, tending to the over-cultivation of the social instincts. Arriving, he would take the *Times* and the *Financial News*, and go to his pet armchair; here he would stay till lunch-time, reading all that bore in any way on

## A COMMENTARY

his affairs, and taking a grave view of every situation. But at lunch a longing to express himself would come, and he would tell his neighbours tales of his little grandsons, of the extraordinary things they did, and of the future he was laying up for them. In the pleasant warmth of midday, over his light but satisfying lunch, surrounded by familiar faces, he would recount these tales in cheerful tones, and his old grey eyes would twinkle; between him and his struggle with those nightly apparitions, there were many hours of daylight, there was his visit to the nursery. But, suddenly, looking up fixedly with strained eyes, he would put a question such as this: 'Do you ever wake up in the night?' If the answer were affirmative, he would say: 'Do you ever find things worry you then out of—out of all proportion?' And, if they did, he would clearly be relieved to hear it. On one occasion, when he had elicited an emphatic statement of the discomfort of such waking hours, he blurted out: 'You don't ever see a lot of great owls sitting on your bed, I suppose?' Then, seemingly ashamed of what he had



## MONEY

just asked, he rose, and left his lunch unfinished.

His fellow-members, though nearly all much younger than himself, had no unkindly feeling for him. He seemed to them, perhaps, to overrate their interest in his grandsons and the state of his investments; but they knew he could not help preoccupation with these subjects; and when he left them, usually at three o'clock, saying almost tremulously: 'I must be off; my grandsons will be looking out for me!' they would exchange looks as though remarking: 'The old chap thinks of nothing but his grandchildren.' And they would sit down to 'bridge,' taking care to play within the means their fathers had endowed them with.

But the 'old chap' would step into a hansom, and his spirit, looking through his eyes beneath the brim of his tall hat, would travel home before him. Yet, for all his hurry, he would find the time to stop and buy a toy or something on the way.

One morning at the end of a cold March they found him dead in bed, propped

## A COMMENTARY

on his pillows, with his eyes wide open. Doctors, hastily called in, decided that he had died from failure of heart action, and fixed the hour of death at anything from two to four; by the appearance of his staring pupils they judged that something must have frightened him. No one had heard a noise, no one could find a sign of anything alarming; so no one could explain why he, who seemed so well preserved, should thus have suddenly collapsed. To his own family he had never told the fact, that every night he woke between the hours of two and four, to meet a row of owls squatting on the foot-rail of his bed — he was, no doubt, ashamed of it. He had revealed much of his religious feeling, but not the real depth of it; not the way his deity of money had seized on his imagination; not his nightly struggles with the terrors of his spirit, nor the hours of anguish spent, when vitality was low, trying to escape the company of doubts. No one had heard the fluttering of his heart, which, beginning many years ago, just as a sort of pleasant habit to occupy his wakeful minutes in the dark,

## MONEY

had grown to be like the beating of a hammer on soft flesh. No one had guessed, he least of all, the stroke of irony that Nature had prepared to avenge the desecration of her law of balance. She had watched his worship from afar, and quietly arranged that by his worship he should be destroyed ; careless, indeed, what god he served, knowing only that he served too much.

They brought the eldest of his little grandsons in. He stood a long time looking, then asked if he might touch the cheek. Being permitted, he kissed his little finger-tip and laid it on the old man's whisker. When he was led away and the door closed, he asked if 'Granddy' were 'quite safe ;' and twice again that evening he asked this question.

In the early light next morning, before the house was up, the under-housemaid saw a white thing on the mat before the old man's door. She went, and stooping down, examined it. It was the little china dog.



# PROGRESS



## IX

### PROGRESS

**M**OTOR cars were crossing the Downs to Goodwood Races. Slowly they mounted, sending forth an oily reek, a jerky grinding sound ; and a cloud of dust hung over the white road. Since ten o'clock they had been mounting, one by one, freighted with the pale conquerors of time and space. None paused on the top of the green heights, but with a convulsive shaking leaped, and glided swiftly down ; and the tooting of their valves and the whirring of their wheels spread on either hand along the hills.

But from the clump of beech-trees on the very top nothing of their progress could be heard, and nothing seen ; only a haze of dust trailing behind them like a hurried ghost.

Amongst the smooth grey beech-stems of that grove were the pallid forms of sheep, and it was cool and still as in a

## A COMMENTARY

temple. Outside, the day was bright, and a hundred yards away in the hot sun the shepherd, a bent old man in an aged coat, was leaning on his stick. His brown face, wrinkled like a walnut, was fringed round with a stubble of grey beard. He stood very still, and waited to be spoken to.

‘A fine day?’

‘Aye, fine enough; a little sun won’t do no harm. ’Twon’t last!’

‘How can you tell that?’

‘I been upon the Downs for sixty year!’

‘You must have seen some changes?’

‘Changes in men—an’ sheep!’

‘An’ wages, too, I suppose. What were they when you were twenty?’

‘Eight shillin’ a week.’

‘But living was surely more expensive?’

‘So ’twas; the bread was mortal dear, I know, an’ the flour black! An’ pie-crust, why, ’twas hard as wood!’

‘And what are wages now?’

‘There’s not a man about the Downs don’t get his sixteen shillin’; some get a pound, some more . . . There they go!



## PROGRESS

Shan't get 'em out now till tew o'clock !'  
His sheep were slipping one by one into the grove of beech-trees where, in the pale light, no flies tormented them. The shepherd's little dark-grey eyes seemed to rebuke his flock because they would not feed the whole day long.

'It's cool in there. Some say that sheep is silly. 'Tain't so very much that they don't know.'

'So you think the times have changed ?'

'Well ! There's a deal more money in the country.'

'And education ?'

'Ah ! Ejucation ? They spend all day about it. Look at the railways too, an' telegraphs ! See ! That's bound to make a difference.'

'So, things are better, on the whole ?'

He smiled.

'I was married at twenty, on eight shillin' a week ; you won't find them doing such a thing as that these days—they want their comforts now. There's not the spirit of content about of forty or fifty years ago. All's for movin' away an' goin' to the towns ; an' when they get there,

## A COMMENTARY

from what I've heard, they wish as they was back; but they don't never come.'

There was no complaining in his voice; rather, a matter-of-fact and slightly mocking tolerance.

'You'll see none now that live their lives up on the Downs an' never want to change. The more they get the more they want. They smell the money these millionneers is spendin'—seems to make 'em think they can do just anythin' 's long as they get some of it themselves. Times past, a man would do his job, an' never think because his master was rich that he could cheat him; he gave a value for his wages, to keep well with himself. Now, a man thinks because he's poor he ought to ha' been rich, and goes about complainin', doin' just as little as he can. It's my belief they get their notions from the daily papers—hear too much of all that's goin' on—it onsettles them; they read about this Sawcialism, an' these millionneers; it makes a pudden' in their heads. Look at the beer that's drunk about it. For one gallon that was drunk when I was young there's twenty gallon now. The very sheep

## PROGRESS

ha' changed since I remember ; not one o' them ewes you see before you there, that isn't pedigree—and the care that's taken o' them ! 'They'd have me think that men's improvin', too ; richer they may be, but what's the use o' riches if your wants are bigger than your purse ? A man's riches is the things he does without an' never misses.'

And crouching on his knee, he added :

'Ther' goes the last o' them ; shan't get 'em out now till tew o'clock. One gone—all go !'

Then squatting down, as though responsibility were at an end, he leaned one elbow on the grass, his eyes screwed up against the sun. And in his old brown face, with its myriad wrinkles and square chin, there was a queer contentment, as though approving the perversity of sheep.

'So riches don't consist in man's possessions, but in what he doesn't want ? You are an enemy of progress ?'

'These Downs don't change—'tis only man that changes ; what good's he doin', that's what I ask meself—he's makin' wants as fast as ever he makes riches.'

## A COMMENTARY

‘Surely a time must come when he will see that to be really rich his supply must be in excess of his demand? When he sees that, he will go on making riches, but control his wants.’

He paused to see if there were any meaning in such words, then answered :

‘On these Downs I been, man an’ boy, for sixty year.’

‘And are you happy?’

He wrinkled up his brows and smiled.

‘What age d’you think I am? Seventy-six!’

‘You look as if you’d live to be a hundred.’

‘Can’t expect it! My health’s good though, ’cept for these.’

Like wind-bent boughs all the fingers of both his hands from the top joint to the tip were warped towards the thumb.

‘Looks funny! But I don’t feel ’em. What you don’t feel don’t trouble you.’

‘What caused it?’

‘Rheumatiz! I don’t make nothin’ of it. Where there’s doctors there’s disease.’

‘Then you think we make our ailments, too, as fast as we make remedies?’

## PROGRESS

He slowly passed his gnarled hand over the short grass.

‘My missus ’ad the doctor when she died. . . . See that dust? That’s motor-cars bringin’ folks to Goodwood Races. Wonderful quick-travellin’ things.’

‘Ah! That was a fine invention, surely?’

‘There’s some believes in them. But if they folk weren’t doin’ everything and goin’ everywhere at once, there’d be no need for them rampagin’ motors.’

‘Have you ever been in one yourself?’

His eyes began to twinkle mockingly.

‘I’d like to get one here on a snowy winter’s day, when ye’ve to find your way by sound and smell; there’s things up here they wouldn’t make so free with. They say from London ye can get to anywhere. But there’s things no man can ride away from. Downs ’ll be left when they’re all gone. . . . Never been off the Downs meself.’

‘Don’t you ever feel you’d like to go?’

‘There isn’t not hardly one as knows what these Downs are. I see the young men growin’ up, but they won’t stay on

## A COMMENTARY

'em ; I see folk comin' down, same as yourself, to look at 'em.'

'What *are* they, then—these Downs?'

His little eyes, that saw so vastly better than my eyes, deepened in his walnut-coloured face. Fixed on those grey-green Downs, that reigned serene above the country spread below in all its little fields, and woods, and villages, they answered for him. It was long before he spoke.

'Healthiest spot in England! . . . . Talkin' you was of progress ; but look at bacon—four times the price now that ever it was when I were young. And families—thirteen we had, my missus and meself ; nowadays if they have three or four it's as much as ever they'll put up with. The country's changed.'

'Does that surprise you ? When you came up here this morning the sun was just behind that clump of beech—it's travelled on since then.'

He looked at it.

'There's no puttin' of it back, I guess, if that's your meaning ? It were risin' then, an' now it's gone past noon.'

## PROGRESS

‘Joshua made the sun stand still ; it was a great achievement !’

‘May well say that ; won’t never be done again, I’m thinkin’. And as to knowin’ o’ the time o’ day, them ewes they know it better than ever humans do ; at tew o’clock exact you’ll see them comin’ out again to feed.’

‘Ah ! well—I must be getting on. Good-bye !’

His little eyes began to twinkle with a sort of friendly mockery.

‘Ye’re like the country, all for movin’ on your way ! Well, keep on, along the tops—ye can’t make no mistake !’

He gave me his old gnarled hand, whose finger-tips were so strangely warped. Then, leaning on his stick, he fixed his eyes upon the beech grove, where his ewes were lying in the cool.

Beyond him in the sun the hazy line of dust trailed across the grey-green Downs, and on the rising breeze came the far-off music of the cars.





**HOLIDAY**



## X

### HOLIDAY

THE curtain whose colour changes from dawn to noon, from night to dawn—the curtain which never lifts, is fastened to the dark horizon.

On the black beach, beneath a black sky with its few stars, the sea wind blows a troubling savour from the west, as it did when man was not yet on the earth. It sings the same troubling song as when the first man heard it. And by this black beach man is collected in his hundreds, trying with all his might to take his holiday. Here he has built a theatre within the theatre of the night, and hung a canvas curtain to draw up and down, and round about lit lights to show him as many as may be of himself, and nothing of the encircling dark. Here he has brought singers, and put a band, armed with pipes of noise, to drown the troubling murmur of the wind. And behind his

## A COMMENTARY

theatre he has made a fire, whose smoke has qualified the troubling savour of the sea.

Male and female, from all the houses where he sleeps, he has herded to this music as close as he can herd. The lights fall on his faces, attentive, white, and still—as wonderfully blank as bits of wood cut out in round, with pencil marks for eyes. And every time the noises cease, he claps his hands as though to say: ‘Begin again, you noises; do not leave me lonely to the silence and the sighing of the night.’

Round the ring he circles, and each small group of him seems saying: ‘Talk—laugh—this is my holiday!’

This is his holiday, his rest from the incessant round of toil that fills his hours; to this he has looked forward all the year; to this he will look back until it comes again. He walks and talks and laughs, around this pavilion by the beach; he casts no glances at the pavilion of the night, where Nature is playing her wind-music for the stars to dance. Long ago he found he could not bear his mother Nature’s inscrutable, ironic face, bending above him in the dark, and with a moan

## HOLIDAY

he drew the clothes over his head. In Her who gave him being he has perceived the only thing he cannot brave. And since there is courage and pride in the feeblest of his hearts, he has made a compact with himself: 'Nature! There is no Nature! For what I cannot understand I cannot face, and what I cannot face I will not think of, and what I will not think of does not exist for me; thus, there is nothing that I cannot face. And—deny it as I may—this is why I herd in my pavilion under my lights, and make these noises against the sighing and the silence and the blackness of the night.'

Back from the dark sea, across a grassy space, is his row of houses with lighted windows; and behind it, stretching inland, a thousand more, huddled, closer and closer, round the lighted railway shed, where, like spider's threads, the rails run in from the expanse of sleeping fields and marshes and dim hills; of dark trees and moon-pale water fringed with reeds. All over the land these rails have run, chaining his houses into one great web so that he need never be alone.

## A COMMENTARY

For nothing is so dreadful to this man as solitude. In solitude he hears the voice of Her he cannot understand: 'Ah! the baby that you are, my baby man!' And he sees Her smile, the ironic smile of evening over land and sea. In solitude he feels so small, so very small; for solitude is silence and silence irony, and irony he cannot bear, not even that of Her who gave him birth.

And so he is neither careful of his beauty nor of his strength; not careful to be clean or to be fine; his only care is not to be alone. To all his young, from the first day, he teaches the same lesson: Dread Her! Avoid Her! Look not on Her! Towns! more towns! There you can talk and listen to your fellows' talk! Crowd into the towns; the eyes in your whitened faces need never see Her there! Fill every cranny of your houses so that no moment of silence or of solitude can come to any one of you. And if, by unhappy chance, in their parks you find yourself alone, lie neither on your back, for then you will see the quiet sunlight on the leaves, the quiet clouds, and birds with

## HOLIDAY

solitude within their wings; nor on your face, or you will catch the savour of the earth, and a faint hum, and for a minute live the life of tiny things that straddle in the trodden grasses. Fly from such sights and scents and sounds, for fear lest terror for your fate should visit you; fly to the streets; fly to your neighbours' houses; talk, and be brave! Or if, and such times will come, your feet and brain and tongue are tired, then sleep! For, next to the drug of fellowship is the anodyne of slumber! And when it is your holiday, and time is all your own, be warned! The lot of those few left among you who are forced to live alone—on the sea, with the sheep of the green hills, guarding the trim wildness of your woods, turning the lonely soil—may for a moment seem desirable. Be sure it is not; the thought has come to you from books! Go to a spot where, though the nights are clear and the sun burns hot, the sea wind smells of salt, and the land wind smells of hay, you can avoid Her, huddled in your throngs! Dread Her! Fly from Her! Hide from Her smile, that seems to say:

## A COMMENTARY

‘Once, when you lived with me, you were a little gentleman. You looked in my eyes and learned a measure of repose, learned not to whimper at the dark, giggle, and jeer, and chatter through your nose, learned to hold yourself up, to think your own thoughts, and be content. And now you have gone from me to be a little cockney man. But for all your airs of courage and your fear of me—I shall get you back!’ Dread Her! Avoid Her! Towns, more towns!

Such is the lesson man teaches, from the very birth, to every child of his unstinted breeding. And well he teaches it. Of all his thousands here to-night, drawn from his crowded, evil-smelling towns, not one has gone apart on this black beach to spend a single minute with his shadow and the wind and stars. His laughter fills the air, his ceaseless chatter, songs, and fiddling, the clapping of his hands; so will it be throughout his holiday.

And who so foolish as to say it is not good that man should talk and laugh and clap his hands; who so blind as not



## HOLIDAY

to see that these are antidotes to evils that his one great fear has brought to him? This ring of him with vacant faces and staring eyes round that anæmic singer with the worn-out voice, or the stout singer with the voice of brass, is but an instance of Her irony : ‘ This, then, is the medicine you have mixed, my little man, to cure the pain of your fevered souls. Well done ! But if you had not left me you would have had no fever ! There is none in the wind and the stars and the rhythm of the sea ; there is none in green growth or fallen leaves ; in my million courses it is not found. Fever is fear—to you alone, my restless mannikin, has fever come, and this is why, even in your holiday, you stand in your sick crowds gulping down your little homœopathic draughts ! ’ . . .

The show is over. The pipes of noise are still, the lights fall dark, and man is left by the black beach with nothing to look on but the sky, or hear but the beat of wave-wings fighting on the sea. And suddenly in threes and fours he scurries home, lest for one second he should see Her face whose smile he cannot bear.



# FACTS



## XI

### FACTS

**E**ACH morning a noise of poured-out water revived him from that state in which his thoughts were occasionally irregular. Raising his face, with its regular nose above a regular moustache just going grey, he asked the time. Each morning he received the same answer, and would greet it with a yawn. Without this opening to his day he would not have known for certain that it had begun. Assured of the fact, he would leap from his bed into his bath, and sponge himself with cold, clear water. 'Straight out of bed—never lose heat!' Such was his saying; and he would maintain it against every other theory of the morning tub. It was his own discovery—a fact on which, as on all facts, he set much store; and every morning he kept his mind fixed on its value. Then, in that underclothing, of which he

## A COMMENTARY

said, 'Never wear any other—lets the skin act!' he would take his stand in a chosen light before a glass, dipping in boiling water a razor on which was written the day's name, and without vanity inspect his face to see that it preserved its shade of faintly mottled red against the encroachments of the Town. Then, with a slanting edge—'Always shave slanting'—he would remove such hairs as seemed to him unnecessary. If he caught himself thinking, he would go to a bottle on the washstand and pour out a little bitter water, which he would drink; then, seizing a pair of Indian clubs, he would wave them. 'I believe in Indian clubs!' he often said. 'Tying his tie at the angle he had tied it for nearly thirty years, and placing lavender water—the only scent he ever used—about his handkerchief, he would open his wife's door, and say, 'How are you, my dear?' Without waiting for an answer he would shut it, and go down.

His correspondence was set out on his writing-table, and as he was not a stupid man he soon disposed of it; then, with

## FACTS

his daily paper—which he had long selected out of every other—he would stand before the hearth, reading, and believing that the news he read was of a definite importance. He took care that this reading should not stimulate his thoughts. He wanted facts, and the fact that the day's facts were swallowed by the morrow's did not disturb him, for the more facts he read the better he was pleased.

After his breakfast—eaten opposite his wife, and ended with some marmalade—he would go forth at ten o'clock, and walk the two miles to the Temple. He believed in walking, wet or fine, for, as he said : ' It keeps your liver acting ! '

On his way he would think of many things, such as : Whether to lay down Gruaud La Rose, 1900, or Château Margaux, 1899 ? And, though alive to its importance, he would soon decide this question, since indecision was repugnant to his nature. He walked by way of the Green Park and Thames Embankment, expanding his chest quietly, and feeling inward satisfaction. To the crossing-

## A COMMENTARY

sweeper nearest to Big Ben he gave on every day, save Saturdays, a nod, and on Saturdays sixpence ; and, because he thus assisted him, he believed the man to be worthy of assistance. He passed all other crossing-sweepers without being conscious of their presence ; and if they had asked for pennies would have put them down as lazy persons making an illicit living. They did not ask, however, accepting his attitude towards them as correct, from the vigour of its regularity. He walked always at the same pace, neither fast nor slow, his head erect, looking before him with an air of : I am getting there ; this is salubrious !

And on getting there he looked at his watch—not because he did not know what it would tell him, but to satisfy his craving for the ascertainment of a fact. It took, he knew, thirty-two minutes between door and door.

Up the stone staircase he would pause half-way and glance through the window at a certain tree. A magpie had once built there. It had been gone now fifteen years, but the peculiar fact remained. Meeting



## FACTS

his clerk in the dark narrow passage beyond the oaken door, he would address the young man thus: 'Mornin', Dyson. Anything fresh?' and pass on into his light and airy room, with its faint scent of Law Reports. Here, in an old Norfolk jacket, a meerschaum pipe, rarely alight, between his teeth, he would remain seated before papers of all sorts, working hard, and placing facts in order, ready for the conclusions of his chief, a man of genius, but devoid of regularity.

At one o'clock he would go out and walk some little way to lunch. When tempted to go elsewhere he would say, 'No, no! Come with me; better grub at Sim's!' He knew this for a fact—no novelty of any kind could alter it. Cigar in mouth, he would then walk for twenty minutes in the Temple Gardens, his hands behind his back, alone or with some friend, and his good-humoured laugh would frequently be heard—the laugh of a fat man; for though by careful weighing he kept his body thin, he could not weigh his soul, and having thus no facts to go by, could never check its bulk.

## A COMMENTARY

From two to four he would continue the arrangement of his facts, and on the rising of the Courts place them before his chief. Strong in his power of seeing them as facts with no disturbing relevance to other things, he would show a shade of patronage to that disorderly distinguished man. Then, washing with Pears' soap, and saying to his clerk, 'Evenin', Dyson ; nothing that won't keep,' he would take his umbrella and walk west. And again he would reflect on many things, such as : Whether to use the iron or cleek for the approach to that last hole ? and would soon decide on one or on the other.

Passing the portals of his Club, of which he used to say, ' I've belonged here twenty years ; that shows you ! ' he would hang his hat upon a certain peg and go into the card-room, where, for small stakes that never varied, he played the game of Bridge till seven o'clock. Then in a hansom cab he would go home, resting body and brain, and looking straight before him at the backs of cabs in front. Entering his drawing-room he would go over to his wife, kiss her, and remark :

## FACTS

‘Well, old girl, what have you been doing?’ and at once relate what he himself had done, finishing thus: ‘Time to dress for dinner! I’ve got a twist!’ In a white tie and swallow-tail if they were dining out, a black tie and tail-less coat if they were dining in—for these were the proved facts of suitability—he would go to his wife’s room, take up one of her toilet bottles, examine the stamp on it, and tell her his programme for the morrow.

His habits in dining out were marked by regularity. A sweet or ice he never touched for fear of gout, of which he had felt twinges. He drank brandy with his coffee, not for fear of sleeplessness, which he had never had, but because he found it adjusted preceding facts more nicely than liqueurs; after champagne he would consume a glass or two of port. Some men drank claret, believing that it did less harm, but he would say: ‘Port after champagne—proved it a dozen times.’ For, though it was really not important to his body which he drank, it concerned his soul to make the choice, and place

## A COMMENTARY

importance on it. When the ladies had withdrawn, he would talk on the facts of Politics and Guns, of Stocks and Women ; and, chiefly in the form of stories—facts about facts. To any one who linked these facts to an idea he would remark at once : ‘ Exactly ! ’ and, staring slightly, restore order with another fact. At last he would go home, and in the cab would touch his wife to see that she was there.

On Sundays he played golf—a game in which, armed with a fact, he hit a little fact long distances until he lodged it in a hole, when he would pick it out again and place it on a little fact and hit it off once more. And this was good for him. Returning in the train with other players of the game, he would sit silently reviewing the details of the business, and a particularly good and pleasant look would come upon his face, with its blue eyes, red cheeks, and fair moustache just going grey. And suddenly he would begin speaking to his neighbour, and tell him how at certain moments he had hit the little fact with an unwonted force, or an unusual gentleness.

## FACTS

Two days before the 12th of August he would take his guns and wife to Scotland, where he rented annually a piece of ground inhabited by grouse.

On arriving he would have a bath, then go out with his keeper and a ferret to 'get his eye in'; and his first remark was always this: 'Well, McNab, and how are you? Afraid I'm a bit above myself!' And his old keeper would answer thus: 'Aye, I'm no saying but ye'll be as well for a day on the hill.'

Each evening on returning from the moors he would cause the dead facts to be turned out of the pony's paniers and laid in rows before him, and, touching them with the end of a stick so as to make sure, he would count them up; and the more there were of them the better he was pleased. Then, when they were removed and hung, he would enter their numbers in a book. And as these numbers grew, he compared them day by day and week by week with the numbers of each former year; thus, according to whether they were more or less, he could tell at any moment how much he was enjoying life.

## A COMMENTARY

On his return to London he would say : ‘ First-class year—five hundred brace.’ Or, shake his head and murmur: ‘ Two hundred and thirty brace—a wretched year !’

Any particularly fine creature that he shot he would have stuffed, so that the fact might be remarked for ever.

Once, or perhaps twice, each year, *malaise* would come on him, a feeling that his life was not quite all he wished, a desire for something that he could not shape in words, a conviction that there were facts which he was missing. At these times he was almost irritable, and would say : ‘ Mistake for a man to marry, depend on it—narrows his life.’ And suddenly one day he would know what he wanted, and, under pretext perhaps of two days’ sport, would go to Paris. The fact accomplished, of irregularity, that he would not have committed in England for the world—was of advantage to his soul, and he would return, more regular than ever.

For he was a man who must be doing, who respected only the thing done. He had no use for schemes of life, theories,

## FACTS

dreams, or fancies. Ideas were 'six a penny,' he would say. And the fact that facts without ideas were 'six a ha'penny' was perhaps the only fact that he did not appreciate. He was made, in fact, for laying trains of little facts, in almost perfect order, in almost all directions. Forced by his nature to start laying without considering where they led to, he neither knew nor cared when or what they would blow up; and when in fact they blew up something unexpected, or led into a *cul de sac*, he would start at once laying them again in the first direction that seemed open. Thus actively employed, he kept from brooding, thinking, and nonsense of all kinds, so busy that he had no time to look ahead and see where he was going; and since, if he had got there he would not have known it, this was just as well.

Beyond everything, he believed in freedom; he never saw the things that his way of acting prevented him from doing, and so believed his life to be the freest in the world.

Nothing occasioned him a more un-

## A COMMENTARY

feigned surprise than to tell him his ways were typical of the country where he lived. He answered with a stare, knowing well enough that no such likeness could be shown him as a fact. It was not his habit to be conscious; he was neither conscious of himself nor of his country, and this enabled him to be the man he was.

When he met himself about the town (which hourly happened) he had no knowledge that it was himself; on the contrary he looked on himself as specially designed, finding most other people 'rather funny.'

An attempt to designate him as belonging to a type or class he mistrusted as some kind of Socialism. And yet he ate with himself in restaurants and private houses, travelled with himself in trains, read the speeches of himself in Parliament, and the accounts of how he had been surrounded by persons of Dutch origin, or on some frontier punished a tribe whose manners were not quite his own. He played golf with himself, and shot with his very images. Nor was he confined to his own class; but frequently drove himself home in cabs, watched himself drilling



## FACTS

in the barrack squares, or, walking up and down in blue, protected his own house at night from burglars. If he required to send a message from his Club, he sent himself; he sold himself his waistcoats, and even laid the pavements of the streets that he trod daily in his pilgrimage. From his neighbourhood Imagination stretched its wings and flitted further on. Patron of precedent, pattern of order, upholder of the Law, where he dwelt an orderly disorder reigned. He was for ever doing things, and out of everything he did there sprang up two more things that wanted to be done, and these things he would do—in time! Believing no real harm of others or himself, he kept young and green! Oh! very green and young! . . .

And in old age, past doing things, seated in the Club smoking-room, he will recount behind his comely grey moustache that day's shooting and that day's run; the marriage of that fine girl; the death of that dear old chap; the details of that first-rate joke, or that bad dinner; and dwelling with love on these isolated facts, his old blue eyes will twinkle. Presently,

## A COMMENTARY

when it is late and he is left alone, he will put his old tired feet up on the sofa, remove the cigar from his old lips, and, holding it a foot from off his eyes, look closely at the ash; finding this fact a little yellow, he will frown.

POWER



## XII

### POWER

**W**HEN he rose every morning, the first thing he would do was to fall on his knees beside his bed. His figure in its white garment—for he wore a night-shirt—was rather long and lean, and looked its longest thus bent from the loins. His thick fair hair, little disturbed by sleep, together with a glimpse of sanguine neck and cheek, was all that could be seen above that figure, for his face was buried in the counterpane. Here he would commune with the deity he had constructed for himself out of his secret aspirations and desires, out of his most private consciousness. In the long and subtle processes of contemplation this deity had come to be a big white-clothed figure, whose face and head were shrouded from his gaze in frosty dimness, but whose hands—great hands, a little red—were always clearly visible, reposing motionless on knees parted be-

## A COMMENTARY

neath the white and flowing garment. The figure appeared in his imagination seated as it were on air ten or fifteen feet above the floor of a white, wide, marble corridor, and its great hands seemed to be pressing down and stilling all that came before them. So oddly concrete was this image that sometimes he addressed no prayers to it, but knelt, simply feeling that it was sitting there above him ; and when at last he raised his head, a strange aspiring look had come into his strained eyes, and face suffused with blood. When he did pray, he himself hardly knew for what he prayed, unless it were to be made like his deity, that sat so quiet, above the marble corridor.

For, after all, this deity of his, like the deity of every other man, was but his temperament exaggerated beyond life-size and put in perfect order—it was but the concretion of his constant feeling that nothing could be trusted to behave, freed from the still, cold hands of Power. He had never trusted himself to act save under the authority of this peculiar deity, much less, then, could he feel that others

## POWER

could be trusted. This lack of trust—which was only, perhaps, a natural desire for putting everything and everybody in their proper places—had made him from a child eligible for almost any post of trust. And Nature, recognising this, had used him a hundred thousand times, weeding him out from among his more irregular and trustful fellows, and piling him in layers, one on another, till she had built out of him in every division of the State, temples of Power. Two qualifications alone had she exacted; that he should not be trustful, and that he should be content to lie beneath the layer above him, until he should come in time to be that upper layer himself. She had marked him down as quite a tiny boy, walking with his governess, chopping the heads off thistles with his stick, and ordering his brothers' games precisely, so that they should all know what they were playing at. She had seen him take his dog, and, squatting on the floor, hold it close to the biscuit that it did not want to eat; and she had marked the expression in his grey eyes, fixed on that little white fox-terrier, trying

## A COMMENTARY

so hard to back out through her collar. She saw at once that he did not trust the little creature to know whether it required to eat the biscuit ; it was her proper time for eating it, and even though by holding her nose close he could not make her eat it, he could put her in the corner for not eating it. And having in due course seen him do so, Nature had felt ever since that he would keep himself apart, year by year and step by step, till he was safely serving in the cold, still corridors of Power. She watched him, then, with interest, throughout his school and university career, considering what division of the State she had best build with him, though whether he should work at feeding soldiers, at supervising education, or organizing the incarceration of his fellows, did not seem to her to matter much. In all these things order was essential, and the love of placing the hand kindly but firmly on the public head, desirable ; further, these were all things that must be done, and with her unerring instinct for economy, Nature saw that he should do them.

He had accordingly entered the State's



## POWER

service at a proper age, and had remained there, rising.

Well aware that his was an occupation tending to the constriction of the mind, he had early made a practice of keeping it elastic by reading, argument, and a habit of presenting every case in every light, before pronouncing judgment; indeed, he would often take another person's point of view, and, having improved on it, show that it was not really what the person thought it. Only when he was contradicted did a somewhat ugly look come into his eyes, and a peculiar smile contract his straight lips between his little fair moustache and his little, carefully kept, fair beard. At such moments he would raise his hands—red, and shapely, though rather large—as though about to press them on the head or shoulders of the presumptuous person. For, certain as he was that he always took all points of view before deciding any matter, he knew he must be right. But he was careful not to domineer in any way, recognising that to domineer was peculiarly unbecoming in a bureaucrat.

Keeping his mind elastic, he was

## A COMMENTARY

always ready to welcome any sort of progress ; the word indeed was often on his lips, and he regarded the thing itself as essential to the well-being of any modern State ; it was only when some particular kind of progress happened to be mentioned that he felt any doubt. Then, caressing his beard slowly, and, if possible, taking up a pen, he would point out the difficulties. These were, it seemed, more numerous than the lay mind had imagined.

In the first place one must clearly understand what was meant by this word progress ; he would personally not admit that it meant advancing backwards. If this were established as a premise, it became imperative to ask whether the public were in a fit condition to assimilate this measure of so-called reform. Personally he had grave doubts ; he was open to conviction, but his doubts were grave. And a very little smile would part his lips, seeming to say : ‘ Yes, yes, my dear sir ; progress—you use the word most glibly, and we all of us admit that it is necessary ; but if you suppose that we are going to

## POWER

progress by trusting human nature—well, pardon me, but is there any precedent? One could trust oneself, no doubt, because of one's sense of duty to one's deity, but—men at large! If you think a minute you will see that they have practically no sense of duty or responsibility at all. You say you wish to foster it, but, my dear sir, if we foster it, what becomes of—Government? Depend on it, a sense of duty is only the possession of a few who have been trained to have it; and I cannot think it wise to take the slightest risk in a matter of this gravity. The bonds that keep us all together, and me on the to—in my place, the machinery of morals and the State, are being daily loosened by disintegrating forces, and considering that I am here—by natural selection, not by accident—to keep the ship together, I am not exactly likely to help another wave to knock the ship to pieces. 'It is,' you say, 'a question of degree.' I consider that a very dangerous saying. I have little doubt that all so-called reforms at all times have been ushered in by the use of that expression. You make the fundamental error of

## A COMMENTARY

overtrusting human nature. Believe me, if you lived here, and saw the machinery of things as closely as I see it, and worked, as I do, in this powerful atmosphere, and knew the worry and the difficulty of changing anything, and the thanklessness of the public that one works for, you would soon get a very different notion of the necessity of what you call reform. You must bear in mind the fact that the State has carefully considered what is best for all, and that I am only an official of the State. And now I have three hours at least before I can get away, of important details (which you, no doubt, despise), connected with the business of the State, and which it is my duty and my pride to transact efficiently; so that you will forgive me if I drop a subject, on which of course I am still open to conviction. Progress, we must all admit, is necessary, but, I assure you, in this case you are making a mistake.'

The little smile died off his lips, and preceding the intruder to the door, he politely opened it. Then, in the marble corridor, he raised his eyes above his

## POWER

visitor's retiring back. There, with its great red hands on the knees parted beneath a white and flowing robe, sat Power—his deity; and a silent prayer, far too instinctive and inevitable to be expressed in words, rose through the stagnant, dusty atmosphere:

‘O great image that put me here, knowing as thou must the failings of my fellow-beings, give me power to see that they do right; let me provide for them the moral and the social diet they require. For, since I have been here, I have daily, hourly, humbly felt more certain of what it is they really want; more assured that, through thy help, I am the person who can give it them. O great image, before thou didst put me here I was not quite certain about anything, but now, thanks be to thee, everything is daily clearer and more definite; and I am less and less harassed by my spirit. Let this go on, great image, till my spirit is utterly at rest, and I am cold and still and changeless as this marble corridor.’



**THE HOUSE OF SILENCE**





### XIII

#### THE HOUSE OF SILENCE

**W**ITHIN the circle of the high grey wall is silence.

Under a square of sky cut by high grey buildings nothing is to be seen of Nature but the prisoners themselves, the men who guard the prisoners, and a cat who eats the prison mice.

This house of perfect silence is in perfect order, as though God Himself had been at work—no dirt, no hurry, no lingering, no laughter. It is all like a well-oiled engine that goes—without a notion why. And each human thing that moves within this circle goes, day after day, year after year—as he has been set to go. The sun rises and the sun goes down—so says tradition in the House of Silence.

In yellow clothing marked with arrows the inhabitants are working. Each when he came in here was measured, weighed, and sounded ; and, according to the entries

## A COMMENTARY

made against his number, he received his silent task, and the proper quantity of food to keep his body able to fulfil it. He resumes this silent task each day, and if his work be sedentary, paces for an hour the speckless gravel yard from a number painted on the wall to a number painted on a wall. Every morning, and on Sundays twice, he marches in silence to the chapel, and, in the voice that he has nearly lost, praises the silent God of prisoners ; this is his debauch of speech. Then, on his avid ears the words of the preacher fall ; and motionless, row on row he sits, in the sensual pleasure of this sound. But the words are void of sense, for the music of speech has drugged his hearing.

Before he was admitted to this House of Silence he had endured his six months' utter solitude, and now, in the small white-washed space, with a black floor whence he has cleaned all dirt, he spends only fourteen hours out of the twenty-four alone, except on Sundays, when he spends twenty-one, because it is God's day. He spends them walking up and down, muttering to himself, listening for sound,

## THE HOUSE OF SILENCE

with his eyes on the little peephole in the door, through which he can be seen but cannot see. Above his mug and plate of shining tin, his stiff, black-bristled brush and a piece of soap, is raised a little pyramid of godly books; no sound or scent, no living thing, no spider even, only his sense of humour comes between him and his God. But nothing whatever comes between him and his walking up and down, his listening for sound, his lying with his face pressed to the floor; till darkness falls, that he may stare at it, and beg for Sleep, the only friend of prisoners, to touch him with her wings. And so, from day to day, from week to week, and year to year, according to the number of the years set opposite the name that once was his.

The workshops of the House of Silence hear no sound but that of work; the men in yellow, with arrows marked on them, are busy with a fearful zest. Their hands and feet and eyes move all the time; their lips are still. And on these lips, from mouth to mouth is seen no smile—so perfect is the order.

## A COMMENTARY

And their faces have one look, as though they said : We care for nothing—nothing ; we hope for nothing—nothing ; we work like this for fear of horror ! Their quick dull stare fastens on him who comes to watch their silence ; and all their eyes, curious, resentful, furtive, have in the depths of them the same defiant meaning, as though they saw in their visitor the world out of which they have been thrown, the millions of the free, the millions not alone all day and every day, the millions who can *talk* ; as though they saw Society, which bred them, nurtured them, and forced their steps to that exactly fitting point of physical or mental stress, out of which they found no way but the crime rewarded with these years of silence ; as though they heard in the footsteps and the muttered questions of this casual intruder the whole pronouncement of man's justice :

‘ You were dangerous ! Your souls, born undersized, were dwarfed by Life to the commission point of crime. For our protection, therefore, we have placed you under lock and key. There you shall

## THE HOUSE OF SILENCE

work—seeing, hearing, feeling nothing, without responsibility, without initiative, bereft of human contact with your kind.

We shall see that you are clean, and have a bare sufficiency to eat, we shall inspect and weigh your bodies, and clothe them with a bare sufficiency of clothes by day and night ; divine service you shall have ; your work shall be apportioned to your strength. Corporal punishment we shall very seldom use. Lest you should give us trouble, and contaminate each other, you shall be silent, and, as far as possible, alone. You sinned against Society ; your minds were bad ; it were better if in our process you should lose those minds ! For some reason which we cannot tell, you had but little social instinct at the start ; that little social instinct soon decayed. Therefore, through bitter brooding and eternal silence, through horror of your lonely cells, and certainty that you are lost—no good, no mortal good to man or thing—*you shall emerge cleansed of all social instinct.* We are humane and scientific, we have outgrown the barbarous theories of old-fashioned law. We act

## A COMMENTARY

for our protection and for your good. We believe in reformation. We are no torturers. Through loneliness and silence we will destroy your minds that we may form fresh minds within the bodies of which we take such care. In silence and in solitude is no real suffering—so we believe, for we ourselves have never passed one single silent day, one single day alone !’

This, by the expression of their eyes, is what the men in yellow seem to hear, and this, by the expression of their eyes, is what they seem to answer :

‘ Guv’nor ! You tell me I did wrong to get in here, brought up like what I was—born in the purple—Brick Street, ’Ammer-smith. My father was never up against the police ; epileptic fits is what he went in for—I oughtn’t to have had him for a father ; I oughtn’t to have had a mother that liked her drop o’ trouble, leavin’ me what you might call violent from a child. That’s where the little difficulty was, you see. The bloke that came about my girl knows that, seein’ he laid two years upon his back after I’d done with ’im. That set ’em on reformin’ me. To do the

## THE HOUSE OF SILENCE

business proper, guv'nor, they gave me six months solitary to start on. All them six months I asks meself: "If I were out again, an' he came hangin' round my girl—what would I do?" And I answers: "Hit 'im like I done!" You tell me I oughtn't to been thinkin' that; guv'nor, I 'adn't nothin' else to think on. Only that, an' what was goin' on outside, with me there buried-up alive. You tell me that ther' solitude ought to ha' done a lot for me, an' so it did. I ain't never been the same man since. Well, when I came out I made a big mistake, I find, to have that sentence up against me, in the earnin' of me livin' honest, like as though I'd never been in prison. I oughtn't to 'ave been a carpenter, I guess, or anythin' where people 'as to trust yer, not likin' them about their houses 'as has been in quod; I ought to ha' had a trade that didn't need no dealings with my fellow-creatures. You tell me what I wanted was to love me neighbour? But Guv'nor, after I come out, I go regular wasted on *that* job. When you get wasted, guv'nor, you take to drink; your stomach feels a funny shiverin'; what

## A COMMENTARY

it wants is warmth, a bit of fire—so, when you gets a sixpence, you lays it out in warmth. That's wrong, you say. But, lucky guv'nor, drink puts heart into a man as has to get his livin' out of lovin' of his neighbour. . . . Soon after that I got another little lot, with six months' solitude again, to put me straight. When you eat your heart out for want o' somethin' else to do, when your mind rots for the need of ever such a little bit to chew on, when you feel all day and every day like a poor dumb varmint of a caged-up rat—like as not you hit a warder, guv'nor. When you hit a warder, it's the cat. 'This time I ought to ha' come out p'raps a different man—an' so I did. I ought to ha' had a different mind, bein' chastened and taught the love o' God ; but, seein', guv'nor, that when I come to think it over, which was all day and every day, I couldn't really find out what I had done which in my case any other man would ha' stopped short o' doin'—bein', *not any other man, but me*—I come out that time meanin' to go upon my own. And on my own I went, and ever since I've been—an out-



## THE HOUSE OF SILENCE

an'-outer, as you can see with lookin' at me now. An' if you ask me what I think of all o' you outside, I can't reply, seein' I'm not allowed to speak.' . . .

This is the answer that they seem to make, their lips move, but no sound comes.

The warder watches these moving lips, his eyes, the eyes of a keeper of wild beasts, are saying : 'Pass on, sir, please, and don't excite the convicts—you have seen all there is to see !'

And so the visitor goes out into the prison yard.

On to the grey old buildings a new grey block is being built ; it runs up high already towards the square of sky ; and on the pale scaffolding are prisoners cementing in the stones. A hundred feet up, they move with silent zest, helping to make the little whitewashed spaces safe, to hold—themselves ; helping to make thick the walls, that they may hear nothing, and their own moaning may be smothered ; helping to join stone to stone, and fill the cracks between, that no creature, however small, may come to share their solitude ; helping to make the

## A COMMENTARY

window-spaces high above their reach, that from them they shall look at—nothing; helping to hide themselves away out of the minds of all who have not sinned against man's justice; for, to forget them in their silence and their solitude is good for man, and to remember them, unpleasant. The sky is grey above them, they are grey against the sky; no sound comes down but the smothered tapping of their tools.

The visitor goes out towards the prison gate; and, meeting him, come three convicts marching in—the tallest in the centre, an old man with active step and grey bristles on his weather-darkened face. Light darts into his eyes fixed on the visitor; he bares his yellow teeth and smiles. His lips move, and out of them come words. So, when skies have been dark all day, the sun gleams through, to prove the beauty of the Earthly Scheme. These words—the precious evidence of purifying solitude, the only words that have been spoken in the House of Silence, come faintly on the prison air: 'Ye ———!'

## ORDER



## XIV

### ORDER

COMING from where they cooked their food, we passed down a passage. The old warder in the dark blue uniform and a cap whose peak hung over his level iron-grey eyebrows, stopped.

‘This,’ he said, ‘is the jewel room;’ and, taking a key that hung below his belt, he opened an iron door. A convict with a yellow face, in yellow clothing marked with arrows, and in his yellow hand a piece of yellow leather, darted a look at us, dropped his glance, and with a dreadful, silent, swift obsequiousness passed us and went out. We stood alone amongst the jewels, that he had evidently been polishing.

‘We call it the jewel room for fun,’ the old warder said, and a smile, the first of the morning, visited his face, but quickly left his eyes again to that strange mournful look, which some eyes have in

## A COMMENTARY

the depths of them—a look, as if in strict attention to the outer things of life, their owner had parted with his soul. He took one of the jewels from the wall, and held it out. It was a light steel bangle joined by a light steel chain to another light steel bangle.

‘That’s what they wear now when it’s necessary to put them on.’

One may see in harness rooms, bits, and chains, and stirrups glisten, but never was harness room so garnished as this little chamber. The four walls were bright as diamonds to the very ceiling with jewels of every kind; light and heavy bangles, long chains, short chains, thin chains, and very thick iron chains.

‘Those are old-fashioned,’ said the warder; ‘we don’t use them now.’

‘And this?’

It stood quite close, made of three very bright steel bars, joined at the top, wide asunder at the bottom, and clamped together by cross bars in the middle.

‘That’s the triangles,’ he said a little hurriedly.

‘Do you flog much?’

## ORDER

He stared. You are lacking — he seemed to say—in delicacy.

‘Very little,’ he answered, ‘only when it’s necessary.’ And unconscious that he had proclaimed the spirit of the system that he served, the spirit of all systems, he drew his heels together, as though saluting discipline.

To his old figure standing there, tall, upright, and so orderly, and to his grave and not unkindly face, it was impossible to feel aversion. But in this little room there seemed to come and stand in line with him, and at his back, in an ever-growing pyramid, shaped to an apex like the very triangles themselves, the countless figures of officialdom. They stood there, upright, and orderly, with the words: ‘Only when it’s necessary,’ coming from their mouths. And as one looked, one saw how chiselled in its form, how smooth and slippery in surface, how impermeable in structure, was that pyramid. Wedged in perfect symmetry, bound together man to man by something common to their souls, this phalanx stood by the force of its own shape, like dead

## A COMMENTARY

masonry ; stone on stone, each resting on the other, solid and immovable, in terrifying stillness. And in the eyes of all that phalanx—blue eyes, brown eyes, grey eyes, and mournful hazel eyes, converging on one point—there was the same look :

‘Stand away, please—don’t touch the pyramid !’

Turning his back on the triangles, the old warder said again :

‘Only when it’s necessary.’

‘And when is it necessary ?’

‘The rules decide that.’

‘Of course. But who makes them ?’

His smile faded. ‘The system,’ he replied.

‘And do you know how the system has come about ?’

He frowned—a strange question, this, to ask him !

‘That,’ he said with slight impatience in his voice, ‘is not for me to say.’ And he jerked his neck, as though continuing :

‘Ask that of him behind me !’

Involuntarily I looked, but there was no one there, behind him ; only the triangles, beautifully bright. Then, with



## ORDER

the same uncanny suddenness there sprang up again a vision of that solid pyramid of men, and the head of each seemed turned over his shoulder, saying :

‘ Ask that of him behind me.’

With a sort of eagerness I tried to see the apex of that pyramid. It was too far away.

‘ We’ve got to maintain order,’ he said suddenly, as though repelling a subtle onslaught on his point of view.

‘ Of course ; everything in this room, I suppose, is for that purpose ? ’

‘ Everything—that’s in use.’

‘ Ah, yes ! I think you said there are some things that are not used now ? ’

‘ Those big iron chains, and these weights here—they weighted the prisoner down with those ; that’s all out of date.’

‘ They look rather queer and barbarous, certainly.’

He smiled.

‘ You may say that,’ he said.

‘ And can you tell me how they came to be disused ? ’

He seemed again to check the action of turning his head round.

## A COMMENTARY

‘No,’ he said, ‘I couldn’t tell you that. They found they weren’t necessary, I suppose.’

‘When they were used, I take it the authorities believed in them?’

‘No doubt,’ he answered, ‘or they wouldn’t have used them.’

‘They never thought that we should be looking at these things, and calling them barbarous, like this!’

He stared at the great manacles.

‘They used them,’ he said, ‘and never thought about it, I dare say.’

‘They must have considered them necessary for discipline.’

‘Just that.’

‘And was discipline any better then than it is now?’

‘Oh, no! Worse! They had a lot more trouble with the prisoners than we have, from what I hear.’

‘If any one had told the authorities then that those heavy things did no good, they’d have laughed at him.’

‘He answered with a smile: ‘Little doubt of that.’

‘I wonder whether, a few years hence,

## ORDER

people will be standing here and saying the same thing about those triangles, and all these other jewels, and calling us barbarians for using them. It would be interesting to know.'

His brows contracted: 'Not likely,' he said; 'you can't do without *them*.'

'You think it would not be possible?'

Again he seemed to check his eyes from looking round.

'No,' he repeated stolidly, 'you can't do without them.'

'It would be dangerous to try?'

He shook his close-cropped head under the peaked cap.

'I shouldn't like to see it tried. We must keep order.'

'At the time they left off using those heavy chains, they must have thought they ran a risk?'

He answered coldly: 'I don't know anything about that.'

'The present state of things is final, then?'

He put the bangles back upon their nail, and turning rather suddenly, as though fearing to be attacked behind, said:

## A COMMENTARY

‘We don’t trouble about such things; we’re here to administer the system as we find it. We don’t use these, except when it’s necessary.’

‘Have you not begged the question?’

He said with dignity: ‘That is not my business,’ laying his hand upon the triangles. And as he did so there seemed to spring up once more that solid phalanx, man linked to man, all with the same schoolmaster’s eyes—a living pyramid, turned to stone by the force of its own shape. And a sound came forth from them as though they were assenting, but it was only the scraping of the triangles, as the old warder pushed them a little further back.

He went to the door and opened it; and going out in answer to this invitation, I looked back at the jewels. They hung in perfect brightness, round about the triangles; and suddenly, with that same dreadful, silent, swift obsequiousness, the man in yellow clothing marked with arrows, with the yellow face, and the yellow leather in his hand, passed us and went in. The iron door closed on him with a clang;

## ORDER

but before it closed, I saw him at work already, polishing those shining jewels.

In dreams I have seen him since, alone with those emblems of a perfect order, working without sound! And in dreams too, guiding me away, I see the old warder with his regular, grave face, and his eyes mourning for something he has lost.



# **THE MOTHER**





## XV

### THE MOTHER

**S**HE walked as though pressed for time, slipping like a shadow along the railings of the houses. With her skimpy figure, in its shabby, wispy black, she hardly looked as if she had borne six sons. She had beneath her arm a little bundle which she always carried to and fro from the houses where she worked. Her face, with tired brown eyes, and hair as black and fine as silk under a black sailor hat, was skimpy too; creased and angled like her figure, it seemed to deny that life had ever left her strength for bearing children.

Though not yet nine o'clock, she had already done the work of her two rooms, lighted the fire, washed the youngest boys, given the four at home their breakfast, swept, made one bed—in the other her husband was still lying—and to that

## A COMMENTARY

husband she had served his tea. She had cut the mid-day ration of the two eldest boys, and, wrapping it in paper, had placed it on the window-sill in readiness for them to take to school; had portioned out the firing for the day, given the eldest boy the pence to buy the daily screws of tea and sugar, washed some ragged cloths, mended a little pair of trousers, put on her hat without consulting the cracked looking-glass, and hurried forth. And, since a penny was important to her, she had walked.

Having taken off the black straw hat, and changed the black and scanty dress for a blue linen frock which nearly hid her broken boots, worn to the thickness of brown paper, she was deemed ready to begin her labours. And while on her knees she scrubbed and polished, a certain sense of pleasurable rest would come to her; gazing into the depths of brass that she had made to shine, she thought of nothing. On some mornings she worked a little stiffly. This was when her husband, returning from some late discussion at his public-house, had struck her with his belt,

## THE MOTHER

to show he was her master. On such mornings she was longer polishing the brass, often forced to clean it twice, having put her eyes too close to it. And she would think, over and over again: 'He didn't ought to hit me, he didn't ought to treat me like he does, and me the mother of his children.' Thus far her thoughts would carry her, but—she was a simple soul—they carried her no further; nor did it ever penetrate her mind that her sons, born to and brought up by a drunken father, would some day carry on the glorious traditions of his life. But soon, because these things had happened to her many times, she would stop brooding, and over the mirroring brass, that gave a queer breadth and roundness to her face, would once more think of nothing.

Down in the kitchen, where she had her dinner, she never mentioned such unpleasant incidents, fearing they might harm her reputation. She talked, in fact, but little, not having much to talk of that would do her good in a social way of speaking. But every now and then something would break within her, and she

## A COMMENTARY

would pour out a monotonous epic on her sons ; as though, in spite of everything, she felt that to have borne them was a credit. In consequence of these outpourings, which came not less than once a week, it was usual to regard her as an incorrigible talker.

In the afternoon, though she no longer polished brass, she polished other things. She left at six o'clock. Then, in the dusk, once more dressed in black, she slipped along the railings of the houses, still hurrying, of course, and more like a shadow even than before. In one of her reddened hands—hands of which, holding them out before some fellow-woman whose soft, ringed fingers she admired, she would say, apologetically : ‘ I’ve such dreadful ’ands, m’m ’—in one of those red, roughened hands she grasped some little extra wrapped in newspaper, in the other the money she had earned.

She would cross the High Street, and, diving down a dim and narrow alley, make a purchase at a shop, and hurry on. Entering her door, she would pause, trying to tell by listening whether her

## THE MOTHER

husband had returned; this she always did, although in fact it made no difference to her going up, since in any case her sons were there, waiting to be fed. Silently passing up the narrow stairs, whose noticeable odour she never noticed, she would enter the front room. Here her four sons, their eyes fixed on the door, would be sitting or sprawling on the bed, teasing each other angrily, like young birds waiting for a meal. Taking off her hat, she would sit down to rest. But seeing her thus sitting, doing nothing, her sons would try to rouse her to activity, pulling her by the sleeve, jogging her chair, and the youngest, perhaps, kissing her with his little dirty mouth. Rising, she would begin to peel potatoes. She peeled them fast, working the upturned knife-blade close to her thin bosom, and round her the boys, affecting not to care now that they saw her working, resumed their restless teasing of each other, casting impatient glances at the busy knife-blade, the falling yellow slips of peel. At short intervals, when she was not too deadly tired, she would snap at them a little, but her power of speech was

## A COMMENTARY

limited ; the things she said had all been said before—her sons did not attend to them too much. Yet, they were good to her according to their lights, preferring her company to their father's.

Presently her knife would stay suspended, the voices of her sons would cease ; the footsteps of their father had been heard.

He would come in, in an old green overcoat, a muffler, and heavy boots ; on his heavy face the look that says : My ways are what my life has made them—the proper ways for me to go ! And according to his mood, sometimes jocular and sometimes sullen, there would be talk or silence, and through those silences the clipping of the knife at the potatoes would be heard, the sounds of cooking, and of washing, and of the making up of beds, and latest of all, the tiny sound of stitching.

But on Saturdays it would be different, for on Saturdays her man would not return until he was compelled by the closing of his public-house. On these evenings her heart would begin to beat

## THE MOTHER

at eight o'clock, and it would go on beating louder and louder as the hours went by, till, as she would have expressed it, she felt 'fit to drop.' And yet, all those hours, while her sons were sleeping, there was at work a strange poison in her soul, a dull fever of revolt, in preparation for the blows that would be given her if he came in drunk—a sort of perverse spirit, vouchsafed by Providence, bringing those blows nearer, almost inviting them, yet keeping her alive beneath them. At the midnight striking of the nearest clock her heart would give a sickening leap under the malodorous and blackened quilt, and she would lie, trying to pretend to sleep. So old was that device, so useless—yet she never gave it up, for her brain was not a fertile one. Soon after would begin his footsteps, slow, wavering, coming up and up, with pauses, with mutterings, with now and then a heavy stumble. Her breath would come in gasps, and her eyes, just opening, would glue themselves to where the door showed dimly by the sputtering candlelight. Slowly that door would open, and he would enter. Through

## A COMMENTARY

her slits of eyes she would look at him as he stood swaying there. And suddenly the angry thought that there he was—the sot that had drunken up her earnings and his own—would give her a dull buzzing in her head ; and all fear left her. Not though he might tear away the blackened quilt, pull her out of bed, and shower blows, was there anything within her but a dull, shrill, waspish anger, shooting from her tongue and eyes. Only when he had finished, and rolled on to the bed to sleep like a dead man, did she feel the pains that he had given her. Then, dragging her feet slowly, she would creep back beneath the quilt, and cover up her face.

But some Saturdays he would come back before the clock had struck twelve ; and, standing by the door, with the light falling on his face, would look at her, swaying but slightly, with his lower lip hanging very loose. Over his face, as he stood there, would spread a leering smile, and he would call her by her name.

Then in her dingy bed she would know that she still had work to do. And with



## THE MOTHER

no smile on her tired face, no joy in her thin body, no thought of anything in her starved brain, not even of the countless children she had borne in her dim alleys to this half-drunken man, nor of the countless children she had still to bear—she would lie waiting.



**COMFORT**



## XVI

### COMFORT

THEY lived in a flat on the fifth floor, facing a park on one side, and, on the other, through the branches of an elm tree, another block of flats as lofty as their own. It was very pleasant living up so high, where they were not disturbed by noises, scents, or the sight of other people—except such people as themselves. For, quite unconsciously, they had long found out that it was best not to be obliged to see, or hear, or smell anything that made them feel uncomfortable. In this respect they were not remarkable; nor was their adoption of such an attitude to life unnatural. So will little Arctic animals grow fur that is very thick and white, or pigeons have heads so small and breast feathers so absurdly thick that sportsmen in despair have been known to shoot them in the tail. They were indeed, in some respects not unlike pigeons, a well-covered

## A COMMENTARY

and personable couple. In one respect they differed from these birds—not having wings, they never soared. But they were kindly folk, good to each other, very healthy, doing their duty in the station to which they had been called, and their three children, a boy and two little daughters, were everything that could be wished for. And had the world been made up entirely of themselves, their like, and progeny, it would—one felt—have been Utopia.

At eight o'clock each morning, lying in their beds with a little pot of tea between them, they read their letters, selecting first—by that mysterious instinct which makes men keep what is best until the end—those which looked as if they indicated the existence of another side of life. Having glanced at these, they would remark that Such-and-such seemed a deserving sort of charity; that So-and-so, they were afraid, was hopeless; and it was only yesterday that this subscription had been paid. These evidences of an outer world were not too numerous; for, living in a flat, they had not the worry of rates,

## COMFORT

with their perpetual reminder of social duties, even to the education of other people's children; the hall porter, too, would not let beggars use the lift; and they had set their faces against belonging to societies, of which they felt that there were far too many. They would pass on from letters such as these to read how their boy at school was 'well and happy'; how Lady Bugloss would be so glad if they would dine on such a day; and of the truly awful weather Netta had experienced in the south of France.

Having dispersed, he to the bathroom, she to see if the children had slept well, they would meet again at breakfast, and divide the newspaper. They took a journal which, having studied the art of making people comfortable, when compelled to notice things that had been happening in a cosmic, not a classic sort of way, did so in a manner to inspire a certain confidence, as who should say: 'We, as an organ of free thought and speech, invite you, gentle reader, to observe these little matters with your usual classic eye. That they are always there, we know; but as

## A COMMENTARY

with meat, the well-done is well-done, and the under-done is under-done — for one to lie too closely by the other would be subversive of the natural order of the joint. This is why, although we print this matter, we print it in a way that will enable you to read it in a classic, not a cosmic, spirit.'

Having run their eyes over such pieces of intelligence, they turned to things of more immediate interest, the speeches of an Opposition statesman, which showed the man was probably a knave, and certainly a fool ; the advertisements of motor-cars, for they were seriously thinking of buying one ; and a column on that international subject, the cricket match between Australia and the Mother Country. The reviews of books and plays they also read, noting carefully such as promised well, and those that were likely to make them feel uncomfortable. 'I think we might go to that, dear ; it seems nice,' she would say ; and he would answer : ' Yes ! And look here, don't put this novel on the list, I'm not going to read that.' Then they would sit silent once again, holding the



## COMFORT

journal's pages up before their breasts, as though sheltering their hearts. If, by any chance the journal recommended books which, when read, gave them pain—causing them to see that the world held people who were short of comfort—they were more grieved than angry, for some little time not speaking much, then suddenly asseverating that they did not see the use of making yourself miserable over dismal matters; it was sad, but everybody had their troubles, and if one looked into things, one almost always found that the sufferings of others were really their own fault. But their journal seldom failed them, and they seldom failed their journal; and whether they had made it what it was, or it had made them what they were, was one of those things no man knows.

They sat at right angles at the breakfast table, and when they glanced up at each other's cheeks their looks were kindly and affectionate. 'You are a comfort to me, my dear, and I am a comfort to you,' those glances said.

Her cheek, in fact, was firm, and round, and fresh, and its strong cheekbone

## A COMMENTARY

mounted almost to the little dark niche of her grey eye. Her hair, which had a sheen as though the sun were always falling on it, seemed to caress the top curve of her clean pink ear. There was just the suspicion of a chin beneath her rounded jaw. His cheek was not so strong and moulded; it was flat, and coloured reddish brown, with a small patch of special shaving just below the side growth of his hair, clipped close in to the top lobe of the ear. The bristly wing of his moustache showed sandy-brown above the corner of his lips, whose fullness was compressed. About that side-view of his face there was the faint suggestion that his appetites might some day get the better of his comfort.

Having finished breakfast they would separate; he to his vocation, she to her shopping and her calls. Their pursuit of these was marked by a direct and grave simplicity, a sort of genius for deciding what they should avoid, a real knowledge of what they wanted, and a certain power of getting it. They met again at dinner, and would recount all they had done

## COMFORT

throughout that busy day: What risks he had taken at Lloyd's, where he was an underwriter; how she had ordered a skirt, been to a picture-gallery, and seen a royal personage; how he had looked in at Tattersall's about the boy's pony for the holidays; how she had interviewed three cooks without result. It was a pleasant thing to hear that talk, with its comfortable, home-like flavour, and its reliance on a real sympathy and understanding of each other.

Every now and then they would come home indignant or distressed, having seen a lost dog, or a horse dead from heat or overwork. They were peculiarly affected by the sufferings of animals; and covering her pink ears, she would cry: 'Oh, Dick! how horrible!' or he would say: 'Damn! don't rub it in, old girl!' If they had seen any human being in distress, they rarely mentioned, or indeed remembered it, partly because it was such a common sight, partly because their instincts reasoned thus: 'If I once begin to see what is happening before my eyes all day and every day, I shall either feel uncomfortable and

## A COMMENTARY

be compelled to give time and sympathy and money, and do harm into the bargain, destroying people's independence; or I shall become cynical, which is repulsive. But, if I stay in my own garden—as it were—and never look outside, I shall not see what is happening, and if I do not see, it will be as if there were nothing there to see!’ Deeper than this, no doubt, they had an instinctive knowledge that they were the fittest persons in the State. They did not follow out this feeling in terms of reasoning, but they dimly understood that it was because their fathers, themselves, and children, had all lived in comfort, and that if they once began diminishing that comfort they would become nervous, and deteriorate. This deep instinct, for which Nature was responsible, made them feel that it was no real use to concern themselves with anything that did not help to preserve their comfort, and the comfort of all such as they were likely to be breeding from, to a degree that would ensure their nerves and their perceptions being coated, so that they literally *could* not see. It made them feel—with a splendid

## COMFORT

subtlety which kept them quite unconscious—that this was their duty to Nature, to themselves, and to the State.

Seated at dinner, they were more than ever like two pigeons, when those comfortable home-like birds are seen close together on a lawn, looking at each other between the movements of their necks towards the food before them. And suddenly, pausing with sweetbread on his fork, he would fix his round light eyes on the bowl of flowers in front of him, and say: ‘I saw Helen to-day, looking as thin as a lath; she simply works herself to death down there!’

When they had finished eating they would go downstairs, and, summoning a cab, be driven to the play. On the way, they looked straight before them, digesting their food. In the streets the lamplight whitened the wet pavements, and the wind blew impartially on starved faces, and faces like their own. Without turning to him, she would murmur: ‘I can’t make up my mind, dear, whether to get the children’s summer suits at once, or wait till after Easter.’ When he had

## A COMMENTARY

answered, there would again be silence. And as the cab turned into a by-street, some woman, with a shawl over her head and a baby in her arms, would pass before the horse's nose, and, turning her deathly face, mutter an imprecation. Throwing out the end of his cigar, he would say quietly: 'Look here, if we're not going abroad this year, it's time I looked out for a fishing up in Skye.' Then, recovering the main thoroughfare, they would reach their destination.

The theatre had for them a strange attraction. They experienced beneath its roof a peculiar sense of rest, like some man-at-arms would feel in the old days when, putting off his armour, he stretched his feet out in the evening to the fire. It was a double process that produced in them this feeling of repose. They must have had a dim suspicion that they had been going about all day in armour; here, and here alone, they would be safe against gaunt realities, and naked truths; nothing here could assail their comfort, since the commercial value of the piece depended on its pleasing them. Everything would

## COMFORT

therefore be presented in a classic—not a cosmic—spirit, suitable to people of their status. But this was only half the process which wrought in them the sense of ease. For, seated side by side, their attentive eyes fixed on the stage, the thrill of ‘seeing life’ would come; and this ‘life’—that was so far removed from life—seemed to bring to them a blessed absolution from all need to look on it in other forms.

They would come out, subtly inspired, secretly strengthened. And whether the play had made them what they were, or they had made the play, was another of those things that no man knows. Their spiritual exaltation would take them to their Mansions, and elevate them till they reached their floor.

But when — seldom, luckily — their journal was at fault, and they found themselves confronted with a play subversive of their comfort, their faces, at first attentive, would grow a little puzzled, then hurt, and lastly angry; and they would turn to each other, as though by exchanging anger they could minimise

## A COMMENTARY

the harm that they were suffering. She would say in a loud whisper: 'I think it's a perfectly disgusting play!' and he would answer: 'So dull—that's what I complain of!'

After a play like this they talked a good deal in the cab on the way home, of anything except the play, as though sending it to Coventry; but every now and then a queer silence would fall between them. He would break it by clucking his tongue against his palate, remarking: 'Confound that beastly play!' And she, with her arms folded on her breast, would give herself a little hug of comfort. They felt how unfairly this play had taken them to see it.

On evenings such as this, before going to their room, they would steal into the nursery—she in advance, he following, as if it were queer of him—and, standing side by side, watch their little daughters sleeping. The pallid radiance of the night-light fell on the little beds, and on those small forms so confidently quiet; it fell too, on their own watching faces, and showed the faintly smiling look about her



## COMFORT

lips, over the feathered collar of her cloak ; showed his face, above the whiteness of his shirt-front, ruddy, almost shining, craning forward with a little puzzled grin, which seemed to say : ‘They’re rather sweet ; how the devil did I come to have them ?’

So, often, must two pigeons have stood, looking at their round, soft, grey-white young ! They would touch each other’s arms, and point out a tiny hand crumpled together on the pillow, or a little mouth pouting at sleep, and steal away on tiptoe.

In their own room, standing a minute at the window, they inhaled the fresh night air, with a reviving sense of comfort. Out there, the moonlight silvered the ragged branches of the elm-tree, the dark block of Mansions opposite—what else it silvered in the town, they fortunately could not see !



**A CHILD**



## XVII

### A CHILD

**I**N Kensington Gardens, that February day, it was very still. Trees, stripped of every leaf, raised their bare clean twigs towards a sky so grey and so unstirring that there might never have been wind or sun. And on those branches pigeons sat, silent, as though they understood that there was no new life as yet ; they seemed waiting, loth to spread their wings lest they should miss the coming of the Spring.

Down in the grass the tiniest green flames were burning, a sign of the fire of flowers that would leap up if the sun would feed them.

And on a seat there sat a child.

He sat between his father and his mother, looking straight before him. It was plain that the reason why he looked so straight before him was that he really had not strength to care to look to right or left—so white his face was, so puny were his limbs. His clothes had evidently

## A COMMENTARY

been designed for others, and this was fortunate, for they prevented the actual size of him from being seen. He was not, however, what is called neglected ; his face was clean, and the utmost of protection that Fate and the condition of his parents had vouchsafed was evidently lavished on him, for round his neck there was a little bit of draggled fur which should have been round the neck of her against whose thin and shabby side he leaned. This mother of his was looking at the ground ; and from the expression of her face she seemed to think that looking at the ground was all life had to offer.

The father sat with his eyes shut. He had shabby clothes, a grey face, and a grey collar that had once been white. Above the collar his thin cheeks had evidently just been shaved—for it was Saturday, and by the colour of those cheeks, and by his boots, whose soles, hardly thicker than a paper sheet, still intervened between him and the ground, he was seen not to be a tramp or outdoor person, but an indoor worker of some sort, and very likely out of work, who had come out to rest in the

## A CHILD

company of his wife and family. His eyes being shut, he sat without the pain of looking at a single thing, moving his jaw at intervals from side to side, as though he had a toothache.

And between this man who had begotten, and this woman who had borne him, the child sat, very still, evidently on good terms with them, not realising that they had brought him out of a warm darkness where he had been happy, out of a sweet nothingness, into which, and soon perhaps, he would pass again—not realising that they had so neglected to keep pace with things, or that things had so omitted to keep pace with them, that he himself had eaten in his time about one-half the food he should have eaten, and that of the wrong sort. By the expression of his face, that pale small ghost had evidently grasped the truth that things were as they had to be. He seemed to sit there reviewing his own life, and taking for granted that it must be what it was, from hour to hour, and day to day, and year to year.

## A COMMENTARY

And before me, too, the incidents of his small journey passed ; I saw him, in the morning, getting off the family bed, where it was sometimes warm, and chew-at a crust of bread before he set off to school in company with other children, some of whom were stouter than himself ; saw him carrying in his small fist the remnants of his feast, and dropping it, or swopping it away for peppermints, because it tired him to consume it, having no juices to speak of in his little stomach. I seemed to understand that, accustomed as he was to eating little, he almost always wanted to eat less, not because he had any wish to die—nothing so extravagant—but simply that he nearly always felt a little sick ; I felt that his pale, despondent mother was always urging him to eat, when there were things to eat, and that this bored him, since they did not strike him as worth all that trouble with his jaws. She must have found it difficult indeed to persuade him that there was any point at all in eating ; for, from his looks, he could manifestly not now enjoy anything but peppermints and kippered her-



## A CHILD

rings. I seemed to see him in his school, not learning, not wanting to learn, anything, nor knowing why this should be so, ignorant of the dispensations of a Providence who — after hesitating long to educate him lest this should make his parents paupers — now compelled his education, having first destroyed his stomach, that he might be incapable of taking in what he was taught. That small white creature could not as yet have grasped the notion that the welfare of the Future lay, not with the Future, but with the Past. He only knew that every day he went to school with little in his stomach, and every day came back from school with less.

All this he seemed to be reviewing as he sat there, but not in thought; his knowledge was too deep for words; he was simply feeling, as a child that looked as he looked would naturally be feeling, on that bench between his parents. He opened his little mouth at times, as a small bird will open its small beak, without apparent purpose; and his lips seemed murmuring:

## A COMMENTARY

‘ My stomach feels as if there were a mouse inside it ; my legs are aching ; it’s all quite natural, no doubt ! ’

To reconcile this apathy of his with recollections of his unresting, mirthless energy down alleys and on doorsteps, it was needful to remember Human Nature, and its exhaustless cruse of courage. For, though he might not care to live, yet, while he was alive he would keep his end up, because he must—there was no other way. And why exhaust himself in vain regrets and dreams of things he could not see, and hopes of being what he could not be ! That he had no resentment against anything was certain from his patient eyes—not even against those two who sat, one on either side of him—unaware that he was what he was, in order that they who against his will had brought him into being, might be forced by law to keep a self-respect they had already lost, and have the unsought pride of giving him an insufficiency of things he could not eat. For he had as yet no knowledge of political economy. He evidently did not view his case in any petty, or in any party, spirit ;

## A CHILD

he did not seem to look on himself as just a half-starved child that should have cried its eyes out till it was fed at least as well as the dogs that passed him; he seemed to look on himself as that impersonal, imperial thing—the Future of the Race.

So profound his apathy !

And, as I looked, the ‘Future of the Race’ turned to his father :

‘Ark at that b——y bird !’ he said.

It was a pigeon, who high upon a tree, had suddenly begun to croon. One could see his head outlined against the grey, unstimulating sky, first bending back, then down into his breast, then back again ; and that soft song of his filled all the air, like an invocation of fertility.

‘The Future of the Race’ watched him for a minute without moving, and suddenly he laughed. That laugh was a little hard noise like the clapping of two boards—there was not a single drop of blood in it, nor the faintest sound of music ; so might a marionette have laughed—a figure made of wood and wire !

And in that laugh I seemed to hear

## A COMMENTARY

innumerable laughter, the laughter in a million homes of the myriad unfed.

So laughed the Future of the richest and the freest and the proudest race that had ever lived on earth, that February afternoon, with the little green flames lighted in the grass, under a sky that knew not wind or sun—so he laughed at the pigeon that was calling for the Spring.

# JUSTICE



## XVIII

### JUSTICE.

**T**HINKING of him as he had looked, sitting there in his worn clothes, a cloth cap crumpled in his hand, leaning a little forward, and staring at the wall with those eyes of his that looked like fire behind steel bars; remembering his words: ‘She’s dead to me—I’ll never think of her again where I’m going!’ I wrote this letter:

‘Dear ——,

‘From something you said yesterday, I feel that I ought to tell you that when you get to Canada you will not be free to marry again.

‘I was present, as you know, when you told your story in the Police Court—a story very often told there. I know that you were not to blame, and that all you said was true. Owing to no fault of yours, your wife has left you for a life of vice. Through this misfortune you have lost

## A COMMENTARY

your home, your children and your work ; and you are going to Canada as a last resource. You and she will pass the rest of your lives in different hemispheres. You are still a young man, strong, accustomed to married life, you are going where married men are wanted, to a country of great spaces and great loneliness, where your homestead may be miles from any other.

‘ This is all true enough ; nevertheless you are as closely bound to this wife who has left you for a life of public shame as if she were the truest wife and mother in this city.

‘ If, where you are going, you meet some girl that you would like to marry, you must not, or you will be a bigamist—a criminal. If this girl come to you unmarried, she will, of course, lose her good name. Your children, if you have any, will be born in what is called a state of shame ; that they have had no voice in the matter of their birth won’t help them, as you will find. If she refuses to come to you unmarried—and you can hardly blame her—you will probably be driven, like



## JUSTICE

most men in your position, to get what comfort you can from women who are like your wife. Society, of course, condemns these women, men of heart regard them with compassion, men of science with dismay. They breed canker in the nation ; but as you cannot marry again, you will, I fear, be driven to their company.

‘There is nothing special in your case—thousands in this country are in a similar position ; you are all governed by an impartial Law.

‘That Law is this: A woman can divorce a man who is faithless and treats her with cruelty or deserts her. A man can divorce a woman who is faithless. You could have divorced you wife ! Why didn’t you ? Let us see !

‘You were first a soldier, and then a working man. They paid you as a soldier, I believe, one shilling and twopence a day ; suppose you saved the pence, allowing for your wife not being on your hands, and your children living on air ? Fourteen-pence a week—three pounds and eight-pence a year, if you were lucky. As a workman your wages were thirty shillings

## A COMMENTARY

a week? With four children you could save perhaps your subscription to the "Hearts of Oak," and, say, twopence a day besides? Three pounds and eightpence every year. A divorce in the High Court of Justice, for to that you were undoubtedly entitled by the Law, would have cost you from sixty to a hundred pounds. So, if you could have arranged to keep your witnesses alive, you might, with strict economy, have been granted your decree, if not yourself already dead, in, say, twenty years.

‘In this delay there is nothing peculiar or unjust. The Law, for rich or poor, artisan or peer, is, as you know, identical. The Courts make no distinction in favour of the wealthy over a man earning his seventy-odd pounds a year, with five pounds in the Savings Bank—a decree for millionaire, or clerk, or working man, costs just about the same.

‘To this rule, however, there is one exception; it is of course in favour of the poor. One who can prove that he is not worth the sum of five-and-twenty pounds is entitled to the name of pauper, and can

## JUSTICE

sue for a divorce *in formâ pauperis*. This does not indeed apply to working men or clerks in work ; but you, who, knocked out of time by the conduct of your wife, had lost your work, and were sleeping in the parks at night or in a common lodging house, not knowing where to turn, could not have proved your worth at five-and-twenty pence. You could have sued *in formâ pauperis*. This was a great privilege ! You should have found a lawyer who would undertake your case on no security, obtained your evidence without the payment of a penny, got your witnesses to come to the Court and give their time for nothing (when every idle hour meant bread out of their mouths) ; you should have achieved these triumphs over Nature, and you might have been divorced for anything from seven to fifteen pounds. True, you had not seven to fifteen pence, but—you had the privilege !

‘ It is admitted that you were a good husband to your wife, as good a husband as a man could be ; it is admitted that the fault was hers entirely. It is admitted that you were entitled to relief.

## A COMMENTARY

By the Law, which is the same for all, however, this was not enough.

‘ For this is what I want you to fully understand : *A man of means* may drive his wife to loathe him, provided he stop short of certain definite things—for the Law does not allow him to be “cruel” to her ; he may entertain himself with other women provided that she does not know, for the Law does not allow him to be “faithless” ; he may be, in fact, at heart a ruffian or a rascal, but—*having means*—if she leave him for another, he can, unless he has bad luck, be sure of his decree. Thus, it did not really matter whether you were false to her, so long as she did not know ; it was almost superfluous to be so kind ; what really mattered was that, either, as a working man with thirty shillings a week, you had sixty to a hundred pounds—or, as a penniless pauper, you had seven to fifteen.

‘ The Law of Divorce, like all our laws, is made without fear or favour, for the protection and safety of us all ; it is founded in justice and equity, that grievances may be redressed, and all who are

## JUSTICE

wrong may have their remedy. It does not concern itself whether a man is rich or poor, but administers its simple principles, requiring those who are not destitute to pay for their decrees at a price that is the same for all, whatever their means may be ; requiring those who are destitute to pay for their decrees at a price beyond their means.

‘ I seem to hear you asking : “ Could I not have been granted a remedy at a price proportioned to my means ? Must I, and every working man whose wife leaves him as mine did, to drink in public houses, and walk the streets at night, be condemned for ever after to live alone, or to live in immorality ? ”

‘ The answer is a simple one : “ If all the clerks and working men, and all those wives of clerks and workingmen—to whom, like you, divorce was due by almost general consent, and was indeed by almost general consent deemed of a desperate importance—were enabled to obtain it at a price within their means, several thousand more divorces would each year be granted in this country. This would have a disastrous

## A COMMENTARY

effect upon the statistics of the marriage tie. Public Opinion, formed, you must remember, exclusively amongst your betters (for on such subjects working men are, and always have been, dumb), formed exclusively by such as can afford to pay for their decrees—this great Public Opinion would feel that a backward step was being taken on the path of moral rectitude. It would feel that, in granting what you, the People, in your dumbness and short sight might be tempted to think was common justice, it would be sacrificing the substance of morals to the shadow. The immorality to which you and your like under the present law are, and ever will be, forced, need never lie open to the light of day, never become a matter of statistics, and offend the Public Eye. What is not a matter of statistics can do no damage to the country's morals or the country's name. Public Opinion is itself secure in the enjoyment of the rights and privileges granted by the law, and it has decided by a simple sacrifice to conserve the moral fame of all. "There must—it reasons—be a sacrifice ; then let us sacrifice those with-

## JUSTICE

out the means to pay ! It is an accident that they, in their thousands, are not included in ourselves ; some must suffer that we may all be moral ! ”

‘ This is the answer. It is too much, perhaps, to ask you, from the marsh of suffering, with your low personal point of view, to appreciate the heights of impersonality reached in this vicarious sacrifice. But you may possibly respect its depths of common sense. Can you blame the practical wisdom of this Public Opinion, in which you have no part ? If you had a part in it, would you not yourself endorse it ? If *you* were a man of means, that is of means sufficient to enjoy the privileges of the Law, would you seriously offer to exert yourself to upset your conception of your country’s moral worth, and lose secretly a little of your self-esteem, that you might extend those privileges to such of your fellow-citizens as could not pay for them ? Would you not rather feel : My own position is secure ; this idea is only sentiment, mere *abstract* justice ! If they want it they must pay for it !

## A COMMENTARY

‘By no means think that this great principle of payment is confined merely to divorce; it underlies all justice in a greater or a less degree. It is “money makes the mare to go!” It is money that dictates the measure of justice and its methods. But this is so mingled with the essence of our lives that we do not even notice it. Why, you could hardly find a man who, if you went to him in private and put your case, would not say at once that you were hardly used! To the Law you cannot go privately; and the Law is the guardian of all justice.

‘I have told you the requirements of the Law. You have not fulfilled them. And, having made this error, you must, evidently, now go forth, either to enjoy your own society for the remainder of your days, or, as Nature drives you, to consort with those who at each touch will remind you of what your wife has now become; and in this journey of enjoyment, whichever of the two journeys it may be, you will be sustained, no doubt, by the consciousness that you are serving the morality of your country, and strength-



## JUSTICE

ening the esteem in which the marriage tie is held. You will be inspired by the knowledge that you are sharing this voyage of pleasure and of privilege with thousands of other men and women, as decent and as kind as you. And you will feel, year by year, prouder and prouder of your country that has reached these heights of justice. . . .’



HOPE



## XIX

### HOPE

**W**ET or fine, hot or cold, nothing was more certain than that the lame man would pass, leaning on his twisted oaken stick, his wicker basket slung on his shoulder. In that basket, covered by a bit of sacking, was groundsel, and rarely, in the season, a few mushrooms kept carefully apart in a piece of newspaper.

His blunt, wholesome, weatherbeaten face with its full brown beard, now going grey, was lined and sad because his leg continually gave him pain. That leg had shrivelled through an accident, and being now two inches shorter than it should have been, did little save remind him of mortality. He had a respectable, though not an affluent, appearance, for his old blue overcoat, his trousers, waistcoat, hat, were ragged from long use and stained by weather. He had been a deep-sea fisherman before his accident, but now he made

## A COMMENTARY

his living by standing on the pavement at a certain spot, in Bayswater, from ten o'clock to seven in the evening. And any one who wished to give her bird a luxury would stop before his basket, and buy a pennyworth of groundsel.

Often—as he said—he had ‘a job to get it,’ rising at five o'clock, and going out of London by an early tram to the happy hunting grounds of those who live on the appetites of caged canaries. Here, dragging his injured limb with difficulty through ground that the heavens seldom troubled to keep dry for him, he would stoop and toilfully amass the small green plant with its close yellow-centred heads, though often—as he mentioned—‘there don't seem no life like in the stuff, the frosts ha' spiled it!’ Having collected all that Fate permitted him, he would take the tram back home, and start out for his day's adventure.

Now and again, when things had not gone well, his figure would be seen stumping home through darkness as late as nine or ten o'clock at night. On such occasions his grey-blue eyes, which had never quite lost

## HOPE

their look of gazing through sea-mists, would reflect the bottom of his soul, where the very bird of weariness lay with its clipped wings, for ever trying to regain the air.

In fact—as he had no need to tell you—he was a ‘trier’ from year’s end to year’s end, but he had no illusions concerning his profession—there was ‘nothing in it’; though it was better on the whole than flowers, where there was less than nothing. And, after all, having got accustomed to the struggles of that bird of weariness within his soul, he would even perhaps have missed it, had it at last succeeded in rising from the ground and taking flight.

‘An ’ard life!’ he had been heard to say when groundsel was scarce, customers scarcer, and the damp had struck up into his shrivelled leg. This, stated as a matter of fact, was the extent of his general complaint, though he would not unwillingly descant on the failings of his groundsel, his customers, and leg, to the few who could appreciate such things. But, as a rule, he stood or sat, silent, watching the world go by, as in old days

## A COMMENTARY

he had watched the waves drift against his anchored fishing-smack ; and the look of those blurred-blue, far-gazing eyes of his, in their extraordinary patience, was like a constant declaration of the simple and unconscious creed of man : ‘ I hold on till I drop.’

What he thought about while he stood there it was difficult to say—possibly of old days round the Goodwins, of the yellow buttons of his groundsel that refused to open properly, of his leg, and dogs that would come sniffing at his basket and showing their contempt, of his wife’s gouty rheumatism, and herrings for his tea, of his arrears of rent, of how few people seemed to want his groundsel, and once more of his leg.

Practically no one stopped to look at him, unless she wanted a pennyworth of groundsel for her pale bird. And when they did look at him they saw—nothing symbolic—simply a brown-bearded man, with deep furrows in his face, and a lame leg, whose groundsel was often of a quality that they did not dare to offer their canaries. They would tell him so, adding



## HOPE

that the weather was cold ; to which, knowing a little more about it than themselves, he would reply : ‘ Yes, m’m—you wouldn’t believe how I feel it in my leg.’ In this remark he was extremely accurate, but they would look away, and pass on rather hastily, doubting whether a man should mention a lame leg—it looked too much as if he wanted to make something out of it. In truth he had the delicacy of a deep-sea fisherman, but he had owned his leg so long that it had got on his nerves ; it was too intimate a part of all his life, and speak of it he must. And sometimes, but generally on warm and genial days, when his groundsel was properly in bloom and he had less need of adventitious help, his customers would let their feelings get the better of them and give him pennies, when ha’pennies would have been enough. This, unconsciously, had served to strengthen his habit of alluding to his leg.

He had, of course, no holidays, but occasionally he was absent from his stand. This was when his leg, feeling that he was taking it too much as a matter of course,

## A COMMENTARY

became what he would call 'a mass o' pain.' Such occasions threw him behind-hand with his rent ; but, as he said : ' If you can't get out, you can't—can you ? ' After these vacations he would make special efforts, going far afield for groundsel, and remaining on his stand until he felt that if he did not get off it then, he never would.

Christmas was his festival, for at Christmas people were more indulgent to their birds, and his regular customers gave him sixpence. This was just as well, for, whether owing to high living, or merely to the cold, he was nearly always laid up about that time. After this annual bout of 'brownchitis,' as he called it, his weather-beaten face looked strangely pale, his blue eyes seemed to have in them the mist of many watches—so might the drowned ghost of a deep-sea fisherman have looked ; and his pale roughened hand would tremble, hovering over the groundsel that had so little bloom, trying to find something that a bird need not despise.

' You wouldn't believe the job I had to find even this little lot,' he would say. ' Sometimes I thought I'd leave me leg

## HOPE

be'ind, I was that weak I couldn' seem to drag it through the mud at all. An' my wife, she's got the gouty rheumatiz. You'll think that I'm all trouble !' And, summoning God - knows - what spirit of hilarity, he smiled. Then, looking at the leg he had nearly left behind, he added somewhat boastfully : ' You see, it's got no strength in it at all—there's not a bit o' muscle left. . . . Very few people,' his eyes and voice seemed proudly saying, ' have got a leg like this !'

To the dispassionate observer of his existence it was a little difficult to understand what attraction life could have for him ; a little difficult to penetrate down through the blackness of his continual toil and pains, to the still living eyes of that bird of weariness, lying within his soul, moving always, if but slightly, its wounded stumps of wings. It seemed, on the whole, unreasonable of this man to cling to life, since he was without prospect of anything but what was worse in this life ; and, in the matter of a life to come, would dubiously remark : ' My wife's always a-tellin' me we can't be no

## A COMMENTARY


worse off where we're a-goin'. An' she's right, no doubt, if so be as we're goin' anywhere !'

And yet, so far as could be seen, the thought : ' Why do I continue living ? ' never came to him. It almost seemed as if it must be giving him a secret joy to measure himself against his troubles. And this was fortunate, for in a day's march one could not come across a better omen for the future of mankind.

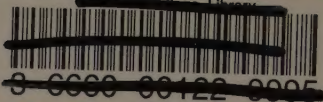
In the crowded highway, beside his basket, he stood, leaning on his twisted stick, with his tired, steadfast face—a ragged statue to the great, unconscious human virtue, the most hopeful and inspiring of all things on earth : Courage without Hope !

END.

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**DATE DUE**

DISCARD





